Stumbling *in* Holiness

Sin and Sanctity in the Church

Brian P. Flanagan

VISIT…

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"With a foundational premise that 'the church is a historical people and not an abstraction . . . in which sin and sanctity coexist,' Flanagan explores the tension of the church's holiness and sinfulness. With care and clarity, he unpicks the threads of this tension and leads the reader to a deeper appreciation of the mystery of the church. A solid contribution to an important debate as the historical community of the Catholic Church publicly struggles with its own failings."

—Neil Ormerod
Australian Catholic University

"Brian Flanagan's new book takes up the extraordinarily challenging but absolutely essential question, 'What does it mean for the church to be both holy and sinful?' Most Christians would readily admit this as their lived experience, but might have a harder time articulating this reality theologically. *Stumbling in Holiness* shows us, in a clear and inviting way, how the framework and language to understand this reality can be found within our theological traditions, and how the holy and sinful church is nothing new, but reaches as far back as the time of Peter and Paul."

—James Martin, SJ
Author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* and *In All Seasons, For All Reasons*

"There are plenty of books on holiness and more than a few on sin. Brian Flanagan has achieved the rare distinction of balancing a conversation about the relationship between sin and holiness that plays down neither. Recognizing the essential connections between sin and holiness in the life of any believing Christian, he tackles the much thornier question of how the two play roles in the Church itself. And he succeeds delightfully. We all may stumble in holiness, but his treatment of the topic is as sure-footed as could be."

—Paul Lakeland
Fairfield University

"With a graceful style and a gritty realism Brian Flanagan wrestles with one of the most deeply felt theological issues over the last century. How can the Christian church pray, think, and act in such a way that honestly acknowledges and confesses the tragic consequences of our collective sinfulness, while clinging onto the healing power of God's grace among us as a source of courage and hope. Flanagan's special flair is his subtle analysis of crucial intergenerational theological disputes in a way that invites a wider audience to perceive what is at stake in a doctrine under development and a community stumbling in holiness."

—Bradford Hinze
Fordham University

"Sinfulness in the Church is a topic that by its very nature makes some believers and leaders quake. Yet Brian Flanagan skillfully demonstrates how sin and sanctity, mistake and forgiveness are all fundamental elements of the spiritual and incarnated journey in faith for individual and institution. Both believer and community of believers can only slouch toward Bethlehem waiting to be reborn. Flanagan's particular contribution is to cut through the false dichotomy—a firewall for fallibility—that the church's sons and daughters can stumble without the church's own sanctity being compromised.

"This book should be read and taught by ecclesiologists, parish ministers, church historians, and liturgists."

—Christopher M. Bellitto
Professor of History
Kean University

"Through a highly readable and engaging account of the many failings of the church in its historic and recent dark nights, Flanagan's central argument is an overwhelmingly positive and hope-filled one: that in acknowledging the church's own sinfulness we also come to realize that it, and we, within it, are always engaged in a pilgrim journey along the way toward holiness. In these engaging chapters, you will find thought-provoking and inspiring treatments of the liturgy, key theological concepts pertaining to sin and holiness alike, treatments of the church's failings—especially ecclesial sin and the debates surrounding the evasion of owning such failings on the part of church authorities—and, finally, that hope-filled conclusion: yes, the church is human and will stumble along the way, but Flanagan holds that there is nothing in the slightest way contradictory to say, as Pope Francis has also frequently acknowledged, that the church is holy and yet sinful at one and the same time. What the author terms 'the thoroughly human people of God' are also, at one and the same time 'God's holy assembly,' gathered and charged with making present the holiness of God in this world. This important addition to the growing literature on ecclesial sin and repentance will challenge, provoke, and inspire in equal measure."

—Gerard Mannion
Amaturo Professor in Catholic Studies
Georgetown University

Brian P. Flanagan

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Acknowledgments

At the beginning of his book *Holiness*, Donald Nicholl writes, "The very act of trying to write about holiness is itself a search for holiness. It is not as though you first achieve holiness and afterwards describe it, but rather that in trying to write about it the very process of writing serves as a kind of geiger counter which discloses holiness to you."[1] My attempts to write about the holiness of the church, as well as about its failings, have been undertaken in a similar spirit of exploration. As the chapters that follow suggest, while I think holiness is always personal, it's never individual—growth in love of God and of neighbor is always a journey with companions, and so it is with great joy that I can thank some of the communities and individuals who have helped me along the way to the completion of this manuscript.

I first would like to thank some of the institutions whose funding and hospitality allowed me to pursue this project. I was first able to develop the proposal for what became this book at a summer writing workshop at the Collegeville Institute at Saint John's University in Minnesota. My home institution, Marymount University, provided faculty development grants and a sabbatical research grant that allowed me to complete this manuscript. The librarians at Marymount and at the wider Washington Research Library Consortium always helped me obtain the materials I needed, and were regularly merciful with regard to my late fees. My dean and other administrators were also consistently generous in providing the encouragement and support needed to develop the ideas presented in this text. Theologians, especially those connected with the College Theology Society and the Ecclesiological Investigations Network, have been invaluable conversation partners over the years. Scott MacDougall (BTFF!) graciously read the entire manuscript, helping to lower the incidence of any of my own errors that may remain.

1. Donald Nicholl, *Holiness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 4.

At Marymount, my students provide a daily confirmation of my vocation as a teaching theologian, with their questions, their enthusiasm, their challenges, and their honesty. Whether in meetings or around the lunch table, my faculty and staff colleagues make Marymount a community and not only a workplace. In the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Brian, Jacquelyn, Kathleen, and Matt have kept me sane, kept me smiling, and kept me hopeful about the future of Catholic higher education.

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Theology is not just done with one's formal faith community, but with wider groups of friends and family who help you to relax, who prod you to more careful thought, and who put up with you when you slip into lecturing professor mode. My fellow musicians in the Monumental City Ancient Fife and Drum Corps have provided a welcome respite from thinking and writing over the years. I could not be who I am today as a theologian or, more importantly, a person, without my family, my parents Bill and Peg, my brother Dave, his wife Gabi, and my godson Fritz. More friends than I could name or count provide the "cloud of witnesses" that cheered this book and its author on along the way. Dan, Julie, Laura, Morgan, Norah, Peter and Janine, Ryan, and Stephen are just some of those whose love and care for me I deeply appreciate.

I could not be who I am, nor could this book be what it is, without Nathan, my closest companion on the road to Emmaus. He picks me up and forgives me when I stumble, and helps me every day to grow in holiness. This book is dedicated with love to him.

Introduction

"Lord, I am not worthy / that you should enter under my roof, / but only say the word, / and my soul shall be healed."[1]

This text from the Order of Mass is prayed at Mass in every Latin Rite Roman Catholic Church. And, more than just the texts, the actions of every Eucharist pulse with the systole and diastole of the joy of being made holy in Christ and of the sorrow of our failures to live in the light of our baptism. This is echoed in our liturgical year, in Lenten fasting and Easter feasting, in Advent's absence and Christmas's presence. And it echoes in the life of the church in these last days, in its past two millennia of pilgrimage along the way opened by Christ toward the fullness of the reign of God.

The creeds of the church invoke faith in the church as "holy." Ecclesial holiness is one of the earliest claims made in any creedal statements about the church. The "Roman Symbol" of the second century refers simply to belief in "the holy church." And even adding "catholic" or "apostolic" seems to have begun more as a way of *identifying* a particular community (i.e., the broad "catholic" church as opposed to a smaller or more localized church) rather than as predicating a particular *quality* of the church. Given that history, Paul O'Callaghan argues that the statement of the Apostles' Creed "*Credo . . . sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam*" is best translated as "I believe that the Catholic Church is holy," in which case ecclesial holiness is one of the most basic creedal statements about the church.[2]

This is, to put it mildly, a fairly audacious claim. Audacious when it was made in the baptismal promises of the second and third centuries, in a community already scarred by betrayals under persecution,

1. Quotations of *The Roman Missal* are taken from the English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).

2. Paul O'Callaghan, "The Holiness of the Church in Early Christian Creeds," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 54 (1988): 59–60.

schism, and the usual day-to-day failures of a pilgrim church. Audacious when made in the twenty-first century in churches marked by the hardened scars and more recent wounds of two millennia of Christian history. Audacious in the context of North American Roman Catholicism, marked by profound ecclesial failure in such recent errors as the sexual abuse of minors and participation in structures of systematic racism. Audacious when made at each baptism and each recitation of the creed in communities regularly, depressingly, aware of their distance from God and weighed down by the effects of human sin. And yet, this assertion of the church's holiness is one of the first claims Christians made about their fragile gathered assembly, even before claims for its unity, apostolicity, or catholicity.

This book asks how we as Christians, and particularly Christians in the Roman Catholic Church, can begin to think and talk rightly about the sanctity and sinfulness of the church. We bring to this topic our own difficult and contradictory experiences of the church. Some of these will be unique to my own biography and yours as a reader. Some of those experiences are entirely positive and life-giving—for many, including myself, the church continues to be a place of encounter with God through the Word and the Holy Spirit, to be a place of grace where the "peace the world cannot give" is made present, to be a reconciling and healing sacrament of the promised reign of God. To call a created reality "holy" is to ascribe to it a certain closeness to God, a transparency of encounter with God's glory in and through encounter with the created reality, a saturation of the reality with the presence of God's Spirit that confers a kind of borrowed divinity upon it. Through the preaching of the Gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, and the formation of the moral life, the Christian church is a uniquely constituted holy community of encounter with God. "Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church," writes Pope Francis in *Gaudete et Exsultate* (9), his apostolic exhortation On the Call to Holiness in Today's World, released just as I was finishing this book.

And yet, encounter with the church has been for many of us an encounter with an absence of holiness. Without unhelpful generalizing about some major ecclesial mistakes of the past (e.g., the usual trio of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust), I can still point to some of the communities that I am a part of that, within recent memory, have seemed to fail in their mission to be holy pres-

ences of the reign of God. I am thinking here of the Roman Catholic churches of the East Coast of the United States with which I am most familiar, and in many other parts of the nation and world, struggling under the weight of sexual misconduct by clergy and the criminally negligent handling of that conduct by presbyters and bishops. We can raise up experiences of past and present ecclesial complicity in structures of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, both within the churches of the United States and in the wider cultural context. We must face honestly the fact that the Christian churches scandalously remain divided from each other in direct contradiction to Christ's will "that they be one," with a complacency and a lack of "holy impatience" for full and visible communion between our churches. You and I can point to our own painful personal examples of bishops and laypeople, presbyters and whole parishes, teachers and theologians failing as disciples of Christ, and doing so not simply as atomized individuals, but as church.

This is not a new phenomenon, as the stories of Peter and of Judas in the biblical passion narratives provide painful witness. And, given the history of human failure in the church, it is not a new subject of reflection in theology. And yet, there may be something newly important and urgent compelling us to speak about ecclesial holiness and sinfulness now, in 2018, with new attention and depth. For some, that urgency comes from some of the deep wounds of recent years in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church. For some, this comes from new awareness or attention to the ecclesial mistakes of the past, whether through an embarrassed sense of past moral complicity or through being on the receiving end of past Christian faults used as a cudgel by the proponents of a "new atheism." For some, it comes from a cultural embrace of authenticity, in public figures and private choices, as a foundational good. And for all of us within the church, it might come through awareness that in as much as "we are the church," we are more or less aware of our own monotonous rhythms of grace and sin, our confused, perplexing personal pilgrimage toward God.

The central conviction of this book is that we are called to hold together at the same time two truths about the Christian church. First, that the church is holy, God's chosen instrument for the salvation of the world. From its foundation in the paschal mystery of its head, Jesus Christ, and the continuing, empowering indwelling of the Holy

Spirit, the church is how God is healing and elevating human social life, forming us into the kind of people that God has always dreamed we will be. Second, that church is sinful, in that as it walks its pilgrimage toward its fulfillment in the reign of God, it stumbles, sometimes spectacularly so. While God has promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church, in the mystery of God's plan the church, as a free human community moving through history, regularly stumbles and fails to live up to its calling.

To say that the church is holy *and* sinful is not contradictory. And yet holding these two truths together in tension is difficult. As members of the church, as leaders in the church, and as theologians, we often try to resolve that tension by opting for only one side of the equation or dividing the holy church from the sinful church, or the holy church from its sinful members. Sometimes we talk as though the church were only the holy church, that our pilgrimage had already ended and that the church were already spotless and free from stain or wrinkle. The actual experiences of error or failure are dismissed as not being "really" the church's errors or failures, and the holy church is disconnected from the more ambiguous, messy experience of the actual historical communities we are. On the other hand, sometimes, especially in the face of particularly stark reminders of our community's fallibility, we despair of the church being anything more than another flawed and failing human institution; we find it difficult to see the working of God's grace in and through such an all-too-human reality, and instead of seeing the church being led by the Holy Spirit on pilgrimage toward its final fulfillment, we seem to be wandering without destination in the desert. We might then reduce our understanding of the holy church as an entirely future event, rather than its reality here and now in history.

This book, therefore, is an attempt to work through the categories that allow us to believe in a holy yet sinful church. We are a church that stumbles in holiness. Both are part of our belief and experience, and holding both aspects of the church's reality together is part of the challenge of speaking the truth about the mystery of the church.

The first chapter, "Sin and Sanctity in the Liturgy," points to the primary source of the church's understanding of itself as holy and sinful, its liturgy. The ordinary liturgy of Christians, and in particular the assembly of the church for the Eucharist, expresses the church's

understanding of its holiness and sinfulness better than works of systematic theology such as this one. In chapter 1, I present a liturgical theological reflection on that expression, highlighting how in its words, actions, gestures, and movement the liturgy holds together the church's belief in its holiness and its awareness of its limitations and sinfulness.

In chapter 2, "Sanctity, Sin, and Church," I present some working definitions of three of the major concepts that come together in the question of ecclesial sin and sanctity—holiness, sinfulness, and church. While not full theological treatments of each concept, this chapter provides shared vocabulary for the later chapters, and highlights some of the aspects of these concepts that will be particularly crucial for the later chapters' explorations of how these terms fit together.

Chapter 3, "I Believe in the Holy Church," outlines a theology of the holiness of the church. First, it looks at the classical treatments of the "formal holiness" of the church; that is, the way its sanctity is given and empowered by God in its origins, in its institutions like the sacraments, scriptures, and ministry, and in the destiny that God is always drawing it toward. Then, it looks at the way in which that sanctity is not only abstract or formal, but occurs and re-occurs in the life of the church, both in the individual lives of the saints, both known and unknown to us, and in the lives of saintly communities, local churches and particular Christian assemblies that show forth the reality of God's holiness in their lives and witness.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Have Mercy on Us, Lord, for We Have Sinned." This verse from Psalm 51 begins my treatment of limitation and sin in the life of the church. After explaining why discussion of ecclesial sin is necessary, despite the difficulty and even shame of admitting the shortcomings of our community, I look at four ways in which we can identify the holy church of God as also sinful: in the fact that individual sinners like ourselves are and remain members of the church; in the sins and errors committed by leaders of the church in the name of the church; in social sin in the church, the residue of personal sins that can lead to continuing injustice or bias within the church; and in cases where churches can be seen to sin together, as a form of shared action. While the final indefectibility of the church is never in question, this chapter explores the way in which we as pilgrim church stumble along our way.

In chapter 5, "Avoiding the Paradox of the Holy and Sinful Church," I review some of the most common ways theologians have attempted to understand the coincidence of ecclesial sin and holiness. In particular, I criticize the most common theological explanation, one in which "the church is sinless, but its members sin," as inadequate to the mystery of the holy and sinful church. This formula, in its attempt to explain away the fact that sanctity and sin reside in the same community of people, leads to a serious ecclesiological error, that of positing a church different and detached from the actual concrete community of women and men living their Christian lives throughout history.

Finally, in chapter 6, "Naming the Holy and Sinful Church," we return to where we started, in the paradox of ecclesial sin and sanctity, but hopefully having learned something about what we as Christians intend and believe by those concepts. I offer five guidelines for further thought and practice with regard to our holy and sinful church for use by theologians but also by pastors, preachers, ministers, and the body of the church as a whole in our attempts to understand ourselves. My hope is that through the use of these guidelines, we might return to our liturgical prayer and to our lives as church with a better understanding of what we are saying when we profess our belief that we, the complicated, stumbling, thoroughly human people of God, are also somehow God's holy assembly, gathered together to make God's holiness present in the world.

Three caveats for the reader are in order before we begin, and all reflect the need to consider this book as the starting point of a conversation, rather than its ending point, if my hopes in writing it are to come to fruition. First, this book reflects its author in ways that I recognize and ways that are yet opaque to me. I am a primarily English-speaking Roman Catholic white male theologian living and working in academia in the United States in the early twenty-first century. All of these things explain, without necessarily excusing, the blind spots, biases, and choices that I have made in the way that I address these topics. My hope is that, in starting such a conversation despite these limitations, and in inviting you, the reader, and my wider Christian community into thought on these topics, any of my own stumbling in the thinking and writing of this text can be put right through the thought and voices of my fellow pilgrims.

Second, more specifically in relation to the wider ecumenical import of this text, is the fact that this is primarily a work of Roman Catholic Christian theology and written by and in large part for a Roman Catholic Christian audience. It relies in large part upon Roman Catholic theological sources and depends, likely in ways beyond my awareness, upon Roman Catholic Christian assumptions. My hope is that what I have written about the church will not be limited to my fellow Roman Catholics, and that despite such limitations it will be a help for other Christians in thinking through what the church is or should be in their own contexts and communities. It is no coincidence that some of the clearest Catholic teaching at the Second Vatican Council and in the subsequent decades on the need for the church to repent for its past errors has been with regard to the division of the one church of Christ; my hope in that nudging my own Roman Catholic community to address the fact of ecclesial failure more forthrightly will, in the long run, allow us to work and pray more fervently for the full visible unity that God desires for the church.

Third, and finally, this book remains at a relatively abstract theoretical level; like a plane flying thirty thousand feet above the ground, it is able to point to many of the major lines on the ground, the most significant details of the topography and the overall landscape of the church. All of my hopes for this book will remain unfulfilled if it does not help evoke, in the reader and in our future ecclesial conversations, further attention to the as-important details on the ground. The narratives of ecclesial sin and sanctity, the stories of holy women, men, and communities, and the dangerous memories of our stumbling churches through time are the unspoken but necessary complement to this more theoretical approach. Continuing to explore the dynamic relation between how we tell the story of the church in systematic theology, on one hand, and in the primary theologies of the liturgy and our lives, on the other, is my hope for the future use of this text. In no way should my characterization of this theoretical work as systematic, therefore, imply that I understand it as a closed or completed system; rather than closing the book on the question of ecclesial sin and sanctity, my understanding is that this text, in a small but hopefully helpful way, instead will help us to talk further as we walk along the road with our God.

CHAPTER 1

Sin and Sanctity in the Liturgy

Each Sunday morning, I walk into my local parish for the Eucharist. I bow to Christ symbolized in the altar, take my seat, perhaps kneel in prayer, and then stand with the gathered assembly as the Mass begins. I walk in with my usual distractions, my frustrations with other drivers on the way to church or with myself for running late out of the door yet again, my hopes for a moment of peace, for a word of insight, or even for an encounter with the triune God. Joined together with familiar faces, visiting tourists to the District of Columbia, families with squirming children and older parishioners whose ginger movements evidence the low-level pain running through their joints, we gather, listen, share a meal, and are sent out to the world in mission, as Christians have done for centuries. Despite the "normality" of these actions—particularly for those, like my ancestors, shaped in the heyday of immersive U.S. European immigrant subcultures—I and the congregants who worship alongside me are engaging in a subversive activity with a scandalous claim: that in our act of gathering, we make Christ present in the world through the act of assembling. In the post-Christian world of the early twenty-first century, the strangeness of postponing brunch to go to Mass is becoming more evident as a cultural marker. The stranger claim by far, however, is that in the flawed, gifted, limited, sinful, and yet often profoundly holy body of Christians that constitutes any given parish or any given assembly for the liturgy, one encounters the presence of Christ through, and not despite of, this concrete company of believers, a group of survivors in the same lifeboat turned into a boatload of pilgrims rowing in the same general direction.

The fourfold presence of Christ in the eucharistic assembly taught by the Second Vatican Council in their Constitution on the Sacred

Liturgy[1] can best be felt in my parish by their use of incense. In addition to the main altar of the church, which functions as a unifying symbol for all four forms of Christ's presence, the Book of the Gospels, the elements of bread and wine, the person of the presiding minister, and the assembly as a whole are all incensed during the Mass as an act of veneration of Christ present through these meditations.[2] We Roman Catholics traditionally have treasured the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine, which become for us Christ's Body and Blood; many of our Protestant sisters and brothers have a similarly rich tradition of appreciation for the real presence of Christ in the word of God heard in Scripture and in preaching. And, although not without disagreement, many Christians value the way in which our preachers and presiders act "in persona Christi"—that is, in their words and actions are able to speak and act in continuity with the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is that fourth form of presence, the presence of Christ in the gathered assembly, that perhaps most gives us pause, and for reasons quite relevant to the arguments of this book. As Bruce Morrill writes, "The scandal of the cross has passed over into the scandal of the church, that is, into the stupefying claim that in such ordinary, limited, and sinful people as ourselves God is revealing God's unbounded love, mercy, and forgiveness for the world."[3] There are at least two pitfalls to be avoided in beginning any reflection upon the holiness and sinfulness of the church. The first is the error of equating "the church" with "the leaders of the church" or, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, with "the bishops" or "the pope." This can be due to unconscious habit, as in newscasts in which "the church did X today" really means that the bishop of a local diocese did X; this can more problematically be due to an erroneous theology of the church

1. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), 7. All quotations from the documents of the council will be from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

2. See also Bruce Morrill's reflections upon the use of incense to venerate the presence of Christ in the deceased in the Rite for Funerals, *Divine Worship and Human Healing* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

3. Bruce Morrill, *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist, 2012), 13.

in which priests, bishops, or the pope are thought of as more "really" the church than the lay faithful, their sisters and brothers in Christ. In either case, limiting a discussion of the holiness of the church to a discussion of its leaders is an error, as I will discuss below. The second pitfall, and one with greater theological complexity, would be that of beginning with more abstract theological reflection upon "the church" as an entity; as I will discuss in chapter 5, many errors in ecclesiological reflection on the church's holiness stem from a mistaken hypostatization and dehistoricization of the church—that is, a mistaken overemphasis upon the church as a "she" or an "it" distinct from the "we" who actually compose the church and distinct from the concrete historical reality in which we, the church, are participants. As a matter of theology, this will require the more extensive argument to follow. As a matter of methodological procedure, however, I judge that beginning at the ground level of the church, so to speak, rather than the higher altitudes of ecclesiological doctrine, may help ground the author's and the reader's reflections together in the messy presence of Christ in the fallible gathered assemblies to which we belong, rather than in a tempting, but perhaps illusory, entity called the church. In the words of Neil Ormerod, such theologies "provide often inspiring but idealized models of church life based on profound notions of *communio*, *perichoresis*, *mysterium*, and *diakonia*. They describe a church that we would all want to belong to. But when we look at the church as an historical concrete reality we may wonder about the discrepancy between the idealized form and the historical facts."[4]

Of the possible methods by which scholars can study the concrete assembly of the church—sociological, ethnographic, narrative—in this first chapter I am using the methods of liturgical theology here as the major starting point for the explorations of this book. Broadly, liturgical theology is a method that begins from the sacramental and liturgical praxis of the Christian church as a privileged expression of the church's faith. Among other theorists, in his classic work *On Liturgical Theology*, Aidan Kavanagh argues that the liturgy of the church is its "*prima theologia*," its "prime" or "first" theology, as

4. Neil M. Ormerod, "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 62 (2002): 5.

distinct from the important yet secondary theology found in academic discourse, systematic theology, and books such as this. Liturgical theology is distinct from theology *about* the liturgy, therefore, in that it understands itself less as speaking about the liturgy and more attending to what the liturgy "speaks" about God and about all things as related to God. Such a perspective is often summarized by the Latin tag *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that is, "the law of prayer is the law of belief." Nevertheless, as Kavanagh documents, in the original texts, the law of prayer is not simply related to belief, but provides the foundation for belief: "This stress is summed up in the patristic maxim *legem credendi, lex statuat supplicandi*, a subtle formulation in which the predicate is all important. For the predicate *statuat* does not permit these two fundamental laws of belief and worship in Christian life to float apart or to be opposed to each other, as in the 'tag' form *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The verb *statuat* articulates the standard of believing and the standard of worshipping within the faithful assembly."[5] In the perspective of Kavanagh and other liturgical theologians, the liturgy is not just one source among many, but a primary "text," comparable to the Scriptures and to other forms of the tradition of the church in its ability to reveal who God is and, for the purposes of this project, who we are in relation to God.

A liturgical theological method is well suited for my investigation for a number of reason. Most practically, many of the readers of this text will have experience of Christian worship in some form and can evaluate my own necessarily particular observations and judgments in relation to their own experiences. Even if the readers' experience is significantly different, from either a difference of rite or of Christian denomination, or from the grace-full diversity of a church that gathers "people of every race, language, and way of life,"[6] my hope is that they will be able to perceive the common structures of Christian prayer that shape our theology.

A second argument comes from the singular relevance of liturgical theology to ecclesiology; as the assembly, the *ecclesia*, the Christian

5. Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), 91.

6. Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II, in the 1973 ICEL Translation of the Roman Missal.

church is most itself in its worship, and so can be expected to there express who it is in relation to God in a determinative way. As Gordon Lathrop writes, "From the viewpoint of liturgical theology, the most basic and constitutive sense of the word 'church' refers to the communal gathering around washing, texts, and meal, as these are interpreted as having to do with Jesus Christ."[7] Kavanagh identifies the liturgy as "an enacted ecclesiology"[8] and asserts that "the liturgy is not some thing separate from the church, but simply the church caught in the act of being most overtly itself as it stands faithfully in the presence of the One who is both object and source of that faith."[9] This is not to say that the liturgy is infallible, nor that our worship is somehow free from the same dynamics of sin and sanctity to be addressed throughout this book; nor should we succumb to the temptation of a "sacramental optimism" that assumes that the liturgy mechanically or magically produces perfect Christians or Christian communities.[10] But if it is true that "a Christian church does not merely use a liturgy [but] *is* the liturgy by which it worships,"[11] then it makes sense to begin with an analysis of how the church performs its relation to the Holy One and to its own holiness and sinfulness through the dynamics of the liturgy. In doing this, I am putting off the more traditional theological procedure of clearly defining terms like "church," "holiness," and "sinfulness" to the next chapter, with the expectation that this exploration of liturgical theology will better ground those definitions than attention to Scripture or past theological reflection alone.

One final preliminary question must be addressed—which liturgy, and whose liturgy? If the object of the investigation is the phenomena of ecclesial holiness and ecclesial sinfulness, then liturgies that explicitly address ecclesial acts of repentance might be an obvious place to begin. For example, Pope John Paul II's "Day of Pardon" service on March 12, 2000, in which he asked pardon from the Lord "for the past

7. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 9.

8. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 67.

9. Kavanagh, 75.

10. The phrase "sacramental optimism" comes from Marcus Mescher, "Liturgy as Power-Sharing: Synergy for Synodality," in *Liturgy + Power*, ed. Brian P. Flanagan and Johann M. Vento (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 49–50.

11. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 97.

and present sins of the sons and daughters of the church,"[12] or, more recently, liturgies of repentance for clergy sexual abuse, express explicitly a particular understanding of ecclesial sin and holiness. But before analyzing such "extraordinary" liturgies of ecclesial repentance, I would like to begin with what for many Christians is the "ordinary" liturgy of the average Sunday Eucharist with which I began this chapter. A similar and perhaps equally rich liturgical theology could be drawn from other forms of Christian liturgy, especially the rite of baptism. And yet due to the regularity of the celebration of Eucharist as part of the "normal" rhythm of ecclesial life in many churches, by contrast to the more occasional celebration of baptism and other forms of Christian prayer, this liturgy provides the most accessible, fruitful source for understanding the church. And while I will be speaking mostly from within the particularities of my own primarily English-language, primarily Latin Catholic experiences, I hope to draw out some of the parallel expressions that one finds in other forms of Christian Sunday worship. In doing so, one finds in the ordinary of any particular Sunday a profound enactment of three components of a theology of ecclesial sin and sanctity: a regular *drawing near to the Holy One*, whose very being provides a definition of the holy; a *pausing* or *retreating* from that presence, grounded in awareness of our creatureliness and limitations, on one hand, and of our sinfulness, on the other; and finally a real *participation* in God's own holiness according to our possibilities as humans, which encompasses our limitations and sin within the wider context of God's grace. This movement, which might be compared to a dance—and particularly a "two-steps-forward-one-step-back" movement that acknowledges our limitation while still being powerfully drawn into participation into the life of God—is a defining rhythm of the liturgy and a profound expression of the paradoxical relation of holiness and sin in the body of the church.

Sin and Sanctity in the Ordinary Liturgy

One possible, but in the end too simplistic, approach to understanding ecclesial holiness in and through the liturgy would be to

12. See www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/events_day_pardon_en.htm.

look only or primarily for the words "sinful" or "holy" in the texts of the prayers and other portions of the Eucharist.[13] Not surprisingly, blunt language of "the sinful church" or the like is absent from the regular liturgy, even if, as we will see, the language of the assembly's need for repentance and mercy and its requests for forgiveness are quite common. A brief look at some of the fixed prayer texts, however, does show that the verbal attribution of holiness to the church is rooted deeply in our liturgical language. In the regular order of the Mass, the church is almost never mentioned *without* being described as holy, even if other attributes are sometimes added, notably in the creed. The phrase "the holy church" is deep in our collective Christian DNA and goes back to some of the earliest prayer texts and creedal statements that have been passed down over the centuries.

As I noted above, one very early creed, the "Roman Symbol" of the second century, refers simply to belief in "the holy church." And even adding "catholic" or "apostolic," as in the later Nicene Creed, seems to have begun more as a way of identifying a particular community (i.e., the broad "catholic" church as opposed to a smaller or more localized church) rather than as predicating a particular quality of the church. Given that history, Paul O'Callaghan argues that the statement of the Apostles' Creed "Credo . . . sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam" is best translated as "I believe that the Catholic Church is holy," in which case ecclesial holiness is one of the most basic creedal statements about the church.[14] Another early church text,[15]

13. For ease of language, in this section I will be referring periodically to "the Mass," "the liturgy," "the Eucharist," etc. Unless otherwise indicated, by this I intend the Ordinary Form of the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, as currently practiced according to the English-language Roman Missal of 2010.

14. Paul O'Callaghan, "The Holiness of the Church in Early Christian Creeds," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 54 (1988): 59–60.

15. The provenance and dating of the Apostolic Tradition is strikingly difficult, and contested. See Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1–17; and Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. Alistair Stewart, 2nd ed. (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 15–62, for a sense of the complexities involved. For my purposes here, it is less important whether it was written by a single author at Rome (Stewart) or collected over a longer period from various sources (Bradshaw) than that at an early date, the "holy church" was being regularly invoked in prayer.

the "Apostolic Tradition" sometimes attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, goes further and incorporates the "holy church" in a number of doxologies, e.g., "But in every blessing let there be said: 'To you [be] glory, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, both now and always and to the ages of ages.'"[16] Further, we find texts like the prayer before the preface of the eucharistic prayer, "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands / for the praise and glory of his name, / for our good / and the good of all his holy Church."[17]

Interestingly, the one place in the regular texts of the Mass where the church is not described as holy comes at the place where the paradox between its holiness and sinfulness is on view; that is, in the prayer that precedes the sign of peace: "Lord Jesus Christ, / who said to your Apostles: / Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, / look not on our sins, / but on the faith of your Church, / and graciously grant her peace and unity / in accordance with your will." This tension—between the first-person plural of "our sins" and the second-person description of "your Church"—raises in stark form a number of the questions guiding this book. Are only the sins "ours," or is the faith "ours" as well? What is the relation between those gathered at the table, who have just asked for forgiveness of their trespasses in praying the Lord's Prayer, and this church? The text of the prayer, and any attempt to simply stack up texts from either the regular texts of the Mass or collects and other prayers from the liturgical year, is insufficient on its own as a source for a liturgical theology of ecclesial holiness. The simple reason is that the Mass is not a text, but a ritual, and as such is an embodied, repeated, imperfect, and at times ambivalent process. It involves words, yes, but also actions, bodily movements, periods of silence, different kinds of linguistic expression from singing and chanting to responding and even whispering. Analyzing the words of a particular prayer or response is crucial to our task, but looking only at the words, or at the words abstracted from the richer context in which they are said, sung, or

16. "Apostolic Tradition" 6:4, in Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition* 52. See also Bradshaw's discussion of the few other places where the church is incorporated in early doxologies at 54.

17. The word "holy" had been omitted in the 1973 English-language Sacramentary.

heard, is therefore analogous to proof texting with scraps of Scripture ripped from the context of their overall narratives and books. In what follows, therefore, I would like to explore some of the words we pray within the wider context of the rhythm of the Mass, the order of approach and retreat that characterizes the church's relation to God's holiness.

The Introductory Rites of the Mass in which the assembly is first gathered provide a helpful starting movement in this ecclesial dance. Some of the elements that will repeat throughout the liturgy, and that are relevant to our discussion here, first occur in these Introductory Rites. First, the entrance, and the priority given to the use of music at that point in the liturgy and at Communion, points to the fundamentally communal nature of Christian prayer in general and in the eucharistic liturgy in particular; the purpose of the Introductory Rites "is to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 46). Second, the greeting of presider and congregation, and their mutual affirmation of the presence of the Lord ("The Lord be with you. / And with your spirit."), place this particular expression of ecclesial participation in the holiness of God into a wider context—grace precedes this particular assembly, both in the individual biographies of the assembled and in the history of the church.

Third, this very act of gathering possesses significance. In a world marked by division and polarization, sometimes violently so, and by increasing self-segregation into homogenous, like-minded communities, the very act of gathering functions as a strategic interruption of "the normal" in our world. Drawing upon the challenging theology of Johann Baptist Metz, Bruce Morrill, writing of this interruption, suggests that "the assembly's work [in gathering] is a highly purposeful act and, as such, a type of revelation, if we attend to how its social and symbolic proclamation of the Gospel, through words, signs, and gestures, disrupts our conventional knowledge of 'the way things are.'"[18] While not automatic or always consistent, the eucharistic assembly is designed to bring together around one ambo and

18. Morrill, *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist*, 34.

one table a new people made up of individuals and communities, in a particular place and time, who were either passively indifferent or actively hostile to each other. Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, drawing upon this image of reconciliation between divided others in 1 Peter 2:10 and Ephesians 2:14, thus sees in the church as assembly, and particularly in its eucharistic assembly, the beginnings of what he names "*l'humanité-que-Dieu-veut*," "the humanity-that-God-wills," in which differences between peoples that were a basis of past division or oppression can become mutually enriching around the same table.[19] Liturgical assembly, therefore, can function as an interruption of evident evils like sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism, as well as the more subtle flaws of mutual indifference and estrangement between communities in an increasingly atomized and self-sorting world.

Following this initial act of gathering, the Penitential Act and Kyrie constitute a major part of the Introductory Rites as well as a primary place in which the church asks pardon for its sinfulness and expresses confidence in God's forgiving mercy. This is particularly true when the Gloria is omitted, as during Sundays in Lent and Advent or during most weekday Eucharists, though even the Gloria, in its threefold petition to Christ who "takes away the sins of the world" to have mercy upon the community, echoes the penitential character of the earlier prayers. Given the collapse in the practice of individual confession and absolution in contemporary U.S. Catholicism,[20] the Penitential Act and Kyrie are the most common, and often the only, time in which Catholics explicitly confess their sin and receive forgiveness in the form of absolution.

The elements of the Penitential Act and Kyrie, particularly in their current postconciliar form, have a complicated history.[21] There are

19. See Brian Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity and Salvation* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 86–90.

20. See Bruce Morrill, "Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power—Ecclesial, Sacramental, Anthropological—among Hierarchy and Laity," *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 585–612.

21. See John Baldovin, "Kyrie Eleison and the Entrance Rite of the Roman Eucharist," *Worship* 60 (1986): 334–47; and Peter Jeffery, "The Meaning and Functions of Kyrie Eleison," in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*, ed. Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008), 127–94.

three formulas for the Penitential Act (Roman Missal, 515–20). Formula A incorporates the *Confiteor* prayer, as in the prayers at the foot of the altar in the previous Mass of John XXIII.[22] Formula B consists of a short, biblically inspired dialogue between the presider and congregation, and is infrequently used in U.S. English-speaking context.[23] Formula C consists of a threefold Kyrie/Christe Eleison, with the opportunity for direct, thematic invocations of Christ (e.g., "You were sent to heal the contrite of heart: / Lord, have mercy. / You came to call sinners: / Christ, have mercy. / You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us: / Lord, have mercy."). With the possible exception of use of Formula A during Lent, Formula C is likely the most dominant usage in the U.S. These prayers are followed by a collective prayer of absolution, followed by the Kyrie Eleison if Formula A or B has been used. Comparable formulas can be found in other western forms of eucharistic prayer, though sometimes in different forms and different locations (for instance, the opening Collect for Purity and optional Kyrie, and the pre-communion Confession of Sin and absolution, in the Rites for Holy Eucharist of the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church). Similarly, requests for mercy, freedom from sin, and purity repeat in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and other forms of the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern churches.

Beyond the details of the texts, I would like to highlight three important aspects of the current form of the Penitential Act and, by doing so, to draw out some of the deep roots of a fuller liturgical

22. This is the Mass identified by Pope Benedict XVI in his motu proprio *Summorum Pontificium* as the "Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite," as distinct from the Ordinary Form of the 1969 Missal analyzed here. It is often referred to as the "Tridentine Mass" or the "Traditional Latin Mass," and is the last in a series of Roman Missals dating back to the sixteenth-century standardization of the Mass after the Council of Trent. For a history of the Roman Missals, see Joanne M. Pierce and John F. Romano, "The *Ordo Missae* of the Roman Rite: Historical Background," in *A Commentary on the Order of the Roman Missal*, ed. Edward Foley, John Francis Baldovin, Mary Collins, and Joanne M. Pierce (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 3–33.

23. Presider: "Have mercy on us, Lord."
Congregation: "For we have sinned against you."
P: "Show us, O Lord, your mercy."
C: "And grant us your salvation." (Roman Missal, 516–17.)

ecclesiology. First, the confession of sin and request for mercy is a collective act, in which the whole assembly confesses its sin and asks God for pardon. Notably for later discussions about the relation between clergy and laity, while the presider has, appropriately, a leading role and pronounces the general absolution, the presider's language remains in the first-person plural, even in the absolution which asks that "almighty God have mercy on *us*, / forgive *us* our sins, / and bring *us* to everlasting life."[24] Even in the first-person language of the *Confiteor*, the request for the prayers of the entire church, and the communal recitation of the prayer, make it clear that it is not "I" as a disconnected individual who is asking for God's mercy, but a "we" formed through our being gathered as an assembly/church who together are confessing our fault and asking for mercy.[25]

Second, for most churchgoing Roman Catholics, this act of collective repentance and absolution has become the ordinary form in which we confess our sin and receive pardon and peace. Given the collapse of individual auricular confession, except among a dedicated minority of Catholics and at particular penitential services during Lent and Advent, Catholics most often confess their sins collectively in this Penitential Act rather than individually in the confessional. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* makes clear that the absolution "lacks the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance" (no. 51). Nevertheless, to distinguish this absolution from that of the sacrament of penance does not invalidate the real sacramental efficacy of the penitential rite: "Faithful to the great tradition of the church, this understanding in no way denies that the forgiveness of God proclaimed and conferred at the conclusion of the penitential act is sacramental; with real efficacy, this act achieves what it proclaims and signifies."[26] Explicitly named an "absolution," and not a "blessing,"

24. Roman Missal, 515, 517, 519. Emphasis added.

25. Joseph Ratzinger goes further: "On the one hand, one speaks of the 'I.' 'I' have sinned, and I do not confess the sins of others. I don't confess the anonymous sins of the collective. I confess with my 'I.' But at the same time, it is all of the members who with their 'I' say 'I have sinned.' The entire living church in all its living members says 'I have sinned.' Cited in Goffredo Boselli, *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014), 40.

26. Boselli, *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy*, 45–46.

this ritual element may have effectively replaced the sacrament of penance for most Catholics as their primary experience of confession of sin and reception of forgiveness—which entails some possible loss. Nevertheless, there may be some gain in the fact that this form can help counteract an overly individualistic understanding of sin and grace, and in the way repentance and forgiveness are more explicitly embedded in the context of the Eucharist.

The location of confession of sin and reception of mercy in relation to the eucharistic liturgy as a whole is the third aspect to be emphasized. Rather than a distraction or, as in auricular confession, as a discrete and perhaps individualized event, the penitential rite functions as a first step in our movement as the gathered assembly toward greater participation in the life of the Holy One. This early ritual moment in Mass provides a turning point in which, after being gathered together, the first thing the *ecclesia* as *ecclesia* does is to pause in repentance for its sinfulness and confidently ask for pardon from the Lord. While dramatically simplified compared to the Extraordinary Form or to some Eastern divine liturgies, the threefold repetition of the Kyrie Eleison is an important moment in which we leave behind the "normal" and, particularly in contrast to the informal nature of some presiders' post-entrance greeting, enter into ritual time and movement.

This moment, therefore, constitutes an initial pause in the movement toward participation in God's holiness, and the first instance of a pattern that will repeat throughout the liturgy. First, we as the assembly take a step of approach toward the Holy One. Yet in doing so, we recognize the need to pause or even retreat in awareness of our distance from the "mysterium tremendum,"[27] a distance that can be attributed either to our own creatureliness and limitation in relation to the Creator of the cosmos (think Moses taking off his sandals before the burning bush in Exod 3:1-6) or to our impurity or sinfulness (think Isa 6:5: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"). Then, in a second moment, the act of pause

27. A reference to the groundbreaking work of Rudolf Otto. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

and of repentance makes us receptive of God's grace—grace that reaches across the gap between our limitations and God's glory, and between our sinfulness and God's sanctity. The act of ritually naming our distance from God allows God to draw us in closer. In this moment, our confession of sin allows our reception of absolution, and our awareness of distance gives us the ability to rightly begin our praise of God in the Gloria and our prayer to God in opening collect, and to rightly receive the word of God proclaimed in the Scriptures. Like someone fasting or, more dramatically, a person living with an eating disorder who has tragically lost the ability to feel hunger, we can become aware of our need for God in this moment, and relearn that need for God each time we pause liturgically to become individually and collectively aware of our hunger. If this is an accurate analysis, then this ritual datum has profound implications for how we understand the holiness and sinfulness of the church writ large: the church grows closer to God and participates more fully in God's holiness not by denying its own creaturely limitations and sinful woundedness, but through confession of its sins and of its needs for God's healing grace.

This pattern recurs and intensifies as the Mass continues and the assembly approaches the altar, pauses for awareness and purification, and then receives the invitation to further participation in God. This occurs through the words of the ritual but also through ritual gesture and posture. In most parishes of the United States, immediately after the *Sanctus*, in which we attempt to echo the angels in acclaiming the thrice-holy God (see Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8), the congregation immediately kneels for the eucharistic prayer. Kneeling in the liturgy has a complicated history, and historically has sometimes been a posture of adoration of God and sometimes a posture of repentance for sin; as Antonio Donghi writes, combining these two aspects, "Kneeling in order to give hospitality to the truth that comes from on high teaches us the sense of our own poverty as creatures and of our weakness as sinners. When we kneel we express our desire to be in harmony with Christ, and at the same time we point to the strong dissonance between such a gift and our own concrete existence."[28]

28. Antonio Donghi, *Words and Gestures in the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 14. For more on the question of kneeling, see John Leonard and

Even though United States bishops adapted the Roman Missal by directing communal kneeling for the entire eucharistic prayer and not simply the consecration in order to promote a particular kind of eucharistic piety, I would contend that there is a blending of humility and penitence in this particular posture that constitutes another "pause" in the liturgy for self-reflection and purification.[29]

Following the doxology, the culmination of the liturgy in the reception of Communion includes numerous elements in which the assembly continues to express its limitations and need for forgiveness, even as we process, figuratively and literally, to the altar. First, in the Lord's Prayer, we pray the words Jesus gave us that both beg for the full arrival of the reign of God and request our own forgiveness, made good in our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. The post-Lord's Prayer embolism then asks that "by the help of [the Lord's] mercy, / we may be always free from sin." Second, in the sign of peace, the forgiveness of trespassers is made ritually explicit in the offer of a sign "that expresses peace, communion, and charity" (Roman Missal, 667). While this symbolically extends to the assembly as a whole and those not present, it often includes those most proximate to us in life as in liturgy, our family and friends from whom we most often need to ask forgiveness and to whom we are called to offer it. Third, the litany requesting mercy and peace from the Lamb of God, "who takes away the sins of the world," echoes the threefold Kyrie of the penitential rite. Finally, before physically approaching the sacrament, the assembly prays, "Lord, I am not worthy / that you should enter under my roof, / but only say the word / and my soul shall be healed." While it's a dangerous temptation to overemphasize any particular text as though the assembly were automatically formed by it, this prayer captures succinctly the tension between

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Nathan Mitchell, *The Postures of the Assembly during the Eucharistic Prayer* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 26–38 and 66–79; and Paul Levesque, "Eucharistic Prayer Posture: From Standing to Kneeling," *Questions Liturgiques* 74 (1993): 30–42.

29. Though not necessarily a development to be celebrated or maintained; Frank Quinn contends that this practice reinforces an "individualistic eucharistic devotionalism" rooted in a noncommunal form of worship focused upon the priest's agency in the moment of the consecration. See Frank C. Quinn, "Posture and Prayer," *Worship* 72 (1998): 67–78.

the assembly's awareness of its distance from God, and of God's ability to reach across that distance in grace. And while holding those two attitudes together in one's awareness remains the work of a lifetime, you could easily get a sense of your own basic theological convictions (and that of many theologians!) by asking which aspect of that prayer seems more "natural" or less of a challenge of faith—awareness of one's unworthiness before God, or confidence in God's healing grace.

It cannot be underemphasized that at this point in the liturgy the assembly stands, if kneeling, and then physically moves forward in procession, one of the oldest forms of Christian ritual action. In doing so we enact bodily the movement toward the source of holiness in a manner both personal and communal; having received the sacrament as an assembly, we are then empowered to be the body of Christ, the *corpus verum* in the most ancient sense of the term.[30] As much as any particular words, this collective bodily movement that began with the gathering of the assembly in its recognition of the need for grace now culminates in its limited yet real participation in the holiness of God. Without artificially separating out any single moment of the Mass such as the consecration or invocation of the spirit, in the overall ritual the assembly expresses itself as both a sinful group of humans in need of God's mercy and as the holy assembly, the body of Christ that is and becomes what it receives in the Eucharist.

This tension between being and becoming, and the fact that the same movement away from sin and toward holiness is repeated weekly, even daily in the Catholic Church, will be a touchstone for my later reflections on how to understand the church's participation in the overflowing mystery of God, on one hand, and the absurd mystery of sin and evil on the other. Gordon Lathrop discusses this tension, drawing upon the love of paradox classical in his Lutheran tradition, while analyzing a comparable dialogue in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom of the Eastern churches. Just before the reception

30. In his classic text, Henri de Lubac traced the history of how the terms *corpus verum* ("true body") and *corpus mysticum* ("mystical body") once referred to the church and the Eucharist, respectively, and came to be reversed in the face of medieval controversies over the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. See Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, trans. Gemma Simmonds, with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007).

of the sacrament, i.e., parallel to the "Lord, I am not worthy" prayer of the Catholic Church, the presider chants what Lathrop calls "an invitation and warning," namely, "holy things for the holy people"; in response, the congregation simultaneously reaffirms the holiness of God while denying to itself any independent holiness apart from its Lord: "One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ." Lathrop continues:

"This dialogue stands as a paradigm of mercy set next to loss, grace set next to judgment, life to death, hope to despair, inclusion to exclusion, God to the gods. The clearest name of these contradictions is Jesus Christ. Christian faith believes that the power of the contradiction in our midst is the Spirit of Christ risen."[31]

An *Ordo* of Ecclesial Sin and Sanctity in Time and Place

Having completed this brief summary of at least some of the ways the ordinary liturgy discusses the assembly's holiness and its limitations, can we discern a pattern? As I suggested earlier, I think we can—a pattern of *approaching* or *drawing near* to God's holiness; of *pausing* or even *retreating* in recognition of our own limitations, due to our nature as creatures and to our awareness of our own sinfulness; and yet a real if incomplete *participation* in God's holiness. Lathrop and other liturgical theologians call this basic form of Christian worship an *ordo*, a regular pattern of Christian worship which, notwithstanding all the variety, past and present, that one finds in forms of Christian liturgy, has a tendency to structure how the Christian liturgy "says" who God is and what all things are in relation to God.[32] Lathrop's work highlights what he calls the "basic patterns" of the Christian order, all in terms of juxtapositions: the juxtaposition of seven days and the eighth day; of the word and the table; of praising God and beseeching God; etc. He asserts that "juxtaposition as a tool of meaning"[33] is characteristic of Christian liturgy's tendency to place seemingly paradoxical elements in relation so as to open the

31. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 132–33.

32. See Lathrop, 33–53. See also the crucial development of the idea of the *ordo* by Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann in *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966).

33. Lathrop, 79.

possibility of new meaning in their relation, what he refers to as a "dialectic of reversal and surprise."[34]

The particular juxtaposition under discussion, the tension between a holy church that confesses its sins, that approaches God and yet is "unworthy that [God] should enter under its roof," is another basic pattern of the Christian order and, therefore, is a basic pattern of what it is to be church. As we will see, thinking systematically about the church's holiness and sinfulness is a difficult, though not impossible, endeavor. The liturgy, the primary theology of the church, notably does not attempt to "solve" the problem of ecclesial holiness and sinfulness with a simple definition or an algebraic formula, but instead ritually recapitulates the mystery through this aspect of its *ordo*: the assembly repeatedly moves toward participation in the holiness of God, all the while being reminded of its unworthiness before God due to creaturely limitation and to sin, while yet beginning to really participate in that holiness in its pilgrim journey. Like a particularly daring metaphor in a poem or a surprising combination of forms in a piece of visual art, the liturgy says something powerful about the mystery of church's sanctity and sin more effectively than most secondary theological attempts to unpack that mystery. Which is to say: my hope is that you will find the next four chapters of this book helpful in understanding the church better, but you might learn as much or more by putting the book down and taking part regularly in a Christian assembly's worship.

Two of the major elements of embodied human existence, time and space, are further defined and redefined within the Eucharist. Rather than being neutral containers in which the Mass happens, space and time are in part constructed by the rhythms of the liturgy; the Eucharist indicates and reinforces a sense of "where" the assembly is, in space and, more importantly, in time.

The construction of a particular kind of space through the liturgy is often more obvious, if not ever straightforward, as arguments over the design of ecclesial spaces and/or renovations of particular church buildings demonstrate. Broadly, in the liturgical churches designations of particularly holy spaces, often with physical or cultural boundaries and restrictions upon entry, help to situate the assembly physically in relation to the holy. In western Christianity, altar rails and rood screens

34. Lathrop, 82.

distinguished the area around the altar from the nave of the church, and, in the East, the iconostasis marking out the ecclesial holy of holies models in architectural form something of the assembly's relation to the holy: present, yet separate; available, yet to be approached with caution; a source of grace, but yet not fully accessible. The strictures upon who could enter these spaces, whether based on a distinction of function between ordained and laity, or, more problematically, based in cultural gender norms and prejudices, distinguished these spaces from the main body of the church building—though the ambivalence of the word "sanctuary" in designating the particular holy place in some usages, and for the entire space given over to the assembly in others, might indicate some of the latent *sensus fidelium* regarding the holiness of the people of God taken as a collective.[35]

Crucial to a liturgically rooted understanding of the holiness and sinfulness of the church, however, is the question of the assembly's relation to time. A fundamental component of this book's overall argument is that the question of *who* or *what* the church is cannot be addressed without attention to *when* the church is. Any attention to the practice of liturgy needs to unpack where the gathered assembly is located in relation to time, and time not considered as a demystified succession of calibrated minutes and hours, but God's time—that is, when we the church are, in relation to God's economy of salvation. The liturgy's location of the assembly in relation to God's saving works in the past and the fulfillment of that salvation in the future expresses not a static combination of holiness and sinfulness, a relation of "both"-"and," but rather a dynamic juxtaposition of "already" and "not yet." This eschatological framework, in which the church exists in history, will be seen to be crucial for an adequate understanding of the church's holiness and sinfulness, and in the liturgy we see the self-expression of the church's location in time.

More specifically, one can find a deep structuring of time in the liturgy comparable to the other aspects of the Christian *ordo*, and much has been written about how in the liturgy the assembly remembers

35. For more on the role space plays in liturgy, see the relevant chapters in Anscar Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*. Volume V: Liturgical Time and Space (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000); and Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *The Ministry of Liturgical Environment* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004).

the past and hopes its way into the future.[36] In terms of the past, many theologians have commented on how the liturgy allows the gathered assembly to remember differently from other ways of thinking about the past. The liturgy of the church does not simply remember the past as a historical fact, nor simply "re-presents" the events of the past as in a pageant or Revolutionary War reenactment, but remembers in such a way as to allow the gathered assembly to experience itself as part of that past. In some ways, the Christian liturgical experience of time is comparable to the Jewish remembrance of the exodus from Egypt in the Passover Haggadah, in which one is asked to see oneself as experiencing God's salvation from slavery in Egypt in a way that blurs the line between past and present: "In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt. . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, redeemed not only our ancestors from Egypt, but He redeemed also us with them."[37] Often referred to as "anamnesis," the Greek word for "memory" used in Christ's eucharistic command to "do this in memory of me," this form of remembering is meant to make the past present by collapsing the distance between our own time and the first century in Galilee and Jerusalem. This anamnesis can also extend past the memory of the particular life of Jesus of Nazareth to include memory of the past of the church, and particularly those Christlike innocent victims of suffering and injustice. Bruce Morrill explores the possibility of liturgical memory to make present the "dangerous memories" of all those who have suffered and continue to suffer in desperate hope for the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.[38]

The future is also thought of and experienced differently in Christianity in general and in a particular way in our liturgical life. "Escha-

36. See, among many others, Bruce Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000); and Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future: The Experience of Time in Jewish and Christian Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

37. Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Seder Night* (New York: Orthodox Union, 2009), 101, cited in O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 106. O'Donnell goes on to compare the significant differences in Jewish and Christian understandings of time that both include memory and expectation, especially given Christian convictions about how the Christ event has transformed time, 173–85.

38. See Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory.*

tology" is the area of theology that investigates the location of the church between God's definitive saving action in Christ and the final consummation of Christ's victory over sin and death that is yet to arrive. In the past, eschatology was mostly thought of as a study of the "last things," often in a particularly individualistic way: heaven, hell, purgatory, judgment, etc. But in recent years, recovery of the overarching eschatological context in which the church exists and strains forward to the completion of God's work in Christ has enriched how we think about the mission and nature of the church and its liturgy.[39] A parish I sometimes attend has, in tall letters above its altar, the words "Christ has died, Christ is risen," and the absence of the third component of that statement of faith, "Christ will come again," stands as an apt metaphor for a theology without eschatological expectation, in which God's action in the past is fully past, and complete. Christianity is then primarily a matter of preserving a story of what happened in the past, leaving less room for expectation of what God will yet do in the future, perhaps in and through our participation in Christ, to finish the work begun in Christ. In such a context, particularly in contemporary U.S. culture, expectations of the future become easily individualized, such that one's expectation is only or primarily about one's own end, and perhaps those of one's immediate family, rather than about the resurrection of the dead and coming "new heaven and new earth" of the reign of God.

A more thoroughly eschatological framework, then, reaches forward to what will be, even to what, for those currently suffering violence and injustice in our world, what *must* come to be if God is to fulfill God's promises. Eschatological expectation of the completion of what God has done in Christ, and continues to do through the Holy Spirit, is less about "getting to heaven when you die" and more about the hope in the coming reign of God.[40] Such hope sustains us in our own suffering and unites us in our mission to the world to God's mission in Christ and in the Spirit. In this period of the "sluggish in-between,"

39. For an overview, see Thomas P. Rausch, *Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

40. For a scripturally rooted critique of this vision of salvation, see N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

in the words of Emmanuel Katongole,[41] the church acts in expectation of the advent of its Lord.

It is obvious, then, that in the liturgy this eschatological focus also collapses time in the opposite direction, making the future reign of God that is to come real and present. Some theologians even use the language of "remembering the future"[42] to indicate how the eucharistic anamnesis does not just bring the past forward into our time and place, but also draws us into the future completion of God's work. This focus upon the completion of God's work permeates the liturgy; as just one small example, in Eucharistic Prayer III, the second half of the prayer begins, "Therefore, O Lord, as we celebrate the memorial / of the saving Passion of your Son, / his wondrous Resurrection / and Ascension into heaven, / and as we look forward to his second coming . . . " In the words of Louis-Marie Chauvet, "in the recalling—the anamnesis—of the *second* coming of the Lord Jesus, as well as of his death and resurrection, the Christian memory is eschatological: it is a memory of the future."[43]

With regard to the question of ecclesial holiness and sinfulness, therefore, the temporal location of the church in the "sluggish in-between," in the "already" of Christ's saving work and the "not yet" of that work's consummation in the reign of God, is a major determining factor of the language and the movement in which the assembly approaches and participates in the holiness of God while pausing to acknowledge its limitations and confess its sins. The order of moving toward the Holy One, pausing in recognition of our shortcomings and yet entering into deeper participation in the life of God, takes place in time in two ways. First, it takes place in the biographical lives of the gathered individuals and of the congregation as whole. The repetition of the liturgy, and the repetition of this process of moving toward God through the acknowledgment of our falling short, highlights the assembly's location as a pilgrim church, what in past times was often called the "church militant" but might just

41. Emmanuel Katongole, *The Journey of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 55.

42. See Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future*.

43. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 239.

as easily be described as the "church penitent." Each Sunday, each Eucharist, even each plea to our Father to forgive us our trespasses, helps us to further locate ourselves on the path to our own salvation, the personal eschatological moment of our death. And, secondly, at the same time the universal historical church is also located within time as a pilgrim; the assembly of disciples that gathered in the Spirit to proclaim the resurrection of Christ and started the long wait for the completion of what God accomplished in the paschal mystery moves forward in chronological time but, in relation to the holiness of God, is right back where we started.

Looking at this dynamic in both individual lives and in the life of the church in the light of the liturgy is important to distinguish the church's sense of time and its eschatological perspective from some other possible options. In the late ancient and early medieval world, particularly in post-Roman western Europe, time was experienced primarily as a context of decline, of a "world grown old" in which everything, including the church and its holiness, was going downhill fast. In almost the opposite direction, in the modern world influenced by the Enlightenment, despite the horrors of the twentieth century, many of us, especially in the United States, still reflexively think of the progress of history as "onward and upward," with a Whiggish sense that each year we advance in knowledge, technological ability, political freedoms, etc.

The time frame of the liturgy, in relation to our future and to our failings, is different from both of those perspectives. While like the early medieval focus upon the "golden age" of the apostles, the church maintains its focus upon making the past present here and now, particularly through the memory of the Eucharist, an eschatological time frame does not see our current Christian experience as "less than" that of the early church. The principle of the church's apostolicity means that we always look back to the early church and the witness of the apostles as the foundation of our faith, but at the same time ecclesial catholicity, and belief in the Holy Spirit's guidance of the church, allows the community to become part of all of the times and places of the world, with their particular gifts and particular challenges, as the church moves through history. Liturgical anamnesis differs from nostalgia, in that our remembering of the past is not an attempt to return to the time of Christ but to bring the Good News to both the geographical and temporal ends of the earth.

But at the same time, and perhaps more importantly for the U.S. context, neither is the church slowly progressing onward and upward to its perfection. This is not to deny the efficacy of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, nor the strength given to the church in its mission through the outpouring of Christ's Holy Spirit. The Gospel has, and will continue to, change the world. But the reign of God comes as a surprising gift, not as an earned culmination; with that in mind, the church's route in history to that reign is not along a perfectly level superhighway but a winding, and sometimes backtracking, pilgrim road.

The assembly's need to repeatedly confess its sins along the journey, and to pray that God's kingdom comes as often as its asks forgiveness for its trespasses, points to the church's location in the "sluggish in-between." Awareness of this liturgical location helps underline a theology of ecclesial holiness in which holiness is not quantitative. The church today may be larger than that in the first century, or more educated, or even have advanced in its understanding of the Gospel beyond some of the blind spots of the earlier community, but that does not mean that a particular assembly in the early twenty-first century in the United States is more—or less—holy than a congregation gathered in first-century Palestine, fourth-century Syria, twelfth-century Paris, or twentieth-century Nigeria. All of these communities, and the church as a whole in its historical pilgrimage, always participate in the mysterious combination of sanctity and sinfulness that characterizes the church already made holy in baptism and not yet at peace in the reign of God.

This further illuminates the significance of the liturgical pattern described above regarding holiness and sinfulness. The movements of approach, pause, and participation in which the assembly engages whenever it celebrates the Eucharist reflects the wider temporal horizon of the individual baptized Christians who struggle over their lives with their own limitations and with the lingering effects of human sin, a situation the Catholic Church names "concupiscence." Their approaches toward God, enabled by grace, allows them to become aware of their own limitations and sinfulness, and in that confession participate more in the love and mercy of God, conditioned by the "already" of their baptisms and the "not yet" of the saints God is called them to be. Moreover, if the liturgy is, as Kava-

nagh suggests, "enacted ecclesiology,"[44] then what is true for a particular individual or congregation is true for the church as a whole. The assembly that is gathered by God is "already" but "not yet" holy or, in more negative terms, "already" but "not yet" sinless or perfect. Further systematic thought in subsequent chapters will suggest some of the reasons that this simultaneity is both difficult to grasp and needs further precision, but my hope is that those discussions will be rooted in the way the eucharistic liturgy, and perhaps therefore the church, holds together two sets of paradoxical, if not contrary, aspects: the church's eschatological location "now" between the past Christ event and its future fulfillment; and the pilgrim church's relation to God and its own limitations and failures such that it is both "holy" and "sinful."

A Contrasting Liturgical Expression

Before moving on from the liturgical sources for a theology of ecclesial sin and holiness, I would like to explore another liturgical example by way of contrast, namely, the papal "Day of Pardon" celebrated by Pope John Paul II as part of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. Here in this "extraordinary form" of liturgical engagement with ecclesial failure, unlike the "ordinary form" of the Eucharist, we see paradox again, but a different and in some ways mistaken one. It reflects a kind of theology, to be outlined more below in chapter 5, in which the eschatological tension of the church "already" but "not yet" has been collapsed, and so another mechanism must be sought to hold together belief in the real holiness of the church with awareness of its historical and present failures and even sinfulness. Reifying an entity called the church, which does not sin, from its members, who do, allows awareness of the paradox of ecclesial sin and sanctity. But this is a very different understanding of the church's relation to holiness and to sin and failure than that found in the "ordinary" confession of the Eucharist, an understanding that is theologically, and liturgically, unsatisfying. Unlike in the previous section, my goal in this section is to outline in some detail this particular liturgy not as a normative source for ecclesial understanding, but as a contrast

44. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 67.

experience in which a theological position determined the liturgy rather than the liturgy determining the church's theology.[45] It provides a salutary warning of what happens when the church attempts to understand its holiness and sinfulness without reference to its eschatological location.

The Day of Pardon ritual took place during the Eucharist on March 12, 2000, the First Sunday in Lent that year, as part of Pope John Paul II's series of events for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.[46] Located between the homily and the eucharistic prayer, the central ritual of the Day of Pardon, after chanting a litany of the saints, was a series of seven moments of intercessory prayer. In each of those moments, the head of a Vatican office stood with the pope before a central crucifix. The head of the office invited the congregation to pray in silence for past sins, often related in some way to the area of competence of their office—for example, Edward Cassidy, president of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, invited prayer for past sins against the Jewish people, and Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, called for prayer for past sins "in service of the truth." After silent prayer, Pope John Paul II prayed a collect asking for forgiveness, both for the church today and for those in the past. The "Kyrie Eleison" was then chanted as a lamp was lit before the crucifix. At the conclusion of the intercessions, the pope approached the cross and embraced it "as a sign of penance and veneration."[47]

The secular and religious press had difficulty in deciding what to call this liturgy: was this a "papal apology"? Was this a prayer for

45. In the terms of liturgical theology, this is *theologia secunda* determining *theologia prima* or, more prosaically, the theological tail wagging the liturgical dog.

46. I discuss this ritual in more scholarly detail in Brian Flanagan, "Ecclesial Holiness and Guilt," in *Contritio: Annäherungen an Schuld, Scham und Reue*, ed. Julia Enxing and Katharina Peetz, with Dorothea Wojtczak (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 259–65, as does Jeremy Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 115–50, and Julia Enxing, "Schuld zur Sprache bringen. Eine Betrachtung des Schuldbekenntnisses Johannes Paulus II," in Julia Enxing, ed., *Schuld. Theologische Erkundungen eines unbequemen Phänomens* (Ostfildern: 2015), 211–33.

47. Relevant texts from the Day of Pardon liturgy can be found at http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/events_day_pardon_en.htm.

mercy for those who sinned, or an apology to those groups sinned against? It was further complicated by the fact that the requests for forgiveness were addressed to God in prayer, rather than to any of the victims of such injustices in the past. The form of the prayer most resembled the Catholic Mass's "universal prayer," sometimes called the "general intercessions" or "prayer of the faithful," more than the penitential rite and Kyrie, and was most similar in structure to the solemn form of invitation, silence, and collect used for the universal prayer of the Good Friday liturgy. The texts and the form of the prayer seemed unclear about for whom the assembly was asking forgiveness—that is, whether mercy was needed for "us," as in the penitential rite, or for "them," meaning the "sons and daughters of the Church" who had sinned in the past. Furthermore, just before the Day of Pardon, the International Theological Commission (ITC), a worldwide group of theologians who advise the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, released a document entitled *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*. This text attempted, despite the ambiguity in some of the prayer texts, to define what the pope was doing as clearly an act of prayer on behalf of the sinful members of the church rather than any admission that past sins could be attributed to "the church as such." In the words of Jeremy Bergen, the ITC document argued that in the Day of Pardon ritual, "Incapable of sin, the holy church repents for the sins of its members."[48]

Beyond the foreseeable strangeness of a ritual constructed sui generis rather than growing organically through centuries of Christian practice, this liturgy's oddity was magnified by the philosophical and theological positions on the nature of the church and the actions of its members that undergirded the ritual. These presuppositions prevented the planners of the liturgy from praying, far more obviously, for forgiveness of the church for its past sins, rather than in such a convoluted way for the forgiveness of those members of the church who sinned in the past. The underlying theology allows for shared collective action on the part of the church with regard to its holy actions, but not with regard to its past sinful actions; in that case, the individual members' actions are their own, not "the church's." Obviously this position, and my reasons for judging it

48. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance*, 209.

inaccurate, requires the much more detailed argument I make below in chapter 5, but at this initial stage one can see how it leads to relatively incoherent liturgy, particularly in comparison to the confession of sin and approach to holiness one finds in the "ordinary" liturgy of the eucharistic assembly.

This is true due to two issues that will become clearer as this study progresses. First, there is the issue of how to understand collective agency on the part of the church. This is in many ways a "pre-theological" problem, inasmuch as the question of how to understand the church's collective action relates to its relatively independent "natural" reality as a human community; its graced nature as God's assembly complicates the issue, but the phenomenon of collective agency is something the church shares with other human societies like a nation-state, a city, an organization, or a neighborhood. How to understand what we mean when we say that "the nation is X" or "the church does Y," and the ways in which the group's agency and identity are similar to and different from that of an individual human subject, is a long-standing area for philosophical investigation, and reaching some judgments about how to speak of the church's collective action will be crucial to understanding ecclesial sin and holiness. In the Day of Pardon liturgy, one can see the consequences of a lack of clarity regarding ecclesial agency—the church is attempting to repent, collectively, for past mistakes done by the members of the community as members of the community, and yet there is not a critical understanding of how the actions, holy and sinful, of the members of the church can be understood as the actions, holy and sinful, of the church. By the terms set in the ITC document and more broadly understood in this dominant ecclesiology of sin and holiness, the church not only need not apologize for the sins of the past, it *cannot* apologize for the sins of the past—because "the church" did not commit them. This sets up a tension not only with Pope John Paul II's stated desire that in the Jubilee the church "should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters,"[49] but also with the ordinary form of ecclesial liturgical prayer in which the church regularly, even daily, is gathered by

49. John Paul II, Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, 11.

God and, in that assembly, confesses its need for forgiveness and its confidence in God's saving grace.

The second issue, in which we move more directly into the realm of theology because we begin discussing sin and grace, and the relation of sin and grace to time and eternity, is a lack of clarity regarding where the community is located in time. The Day of Pardon is better on this, in that many of the prayers and actions are an attempt to address the sins of the past in relation to the present, with a few gestures toward further healing in the future. But a more robust eschatological framework might have allowed greater clarity on how the sins of the church within history fit in relation to God's eschatological timeline. In the Day of Pardon ritual, there's a whiff of the ecclesiological Whiggism noted above, in that sin appears a reality of the past, but is not addressed as a reality of the present or of the future—the church confesses past sin, with the perhaps unfounded assumption that the church is not sinning, is not less than holy, at this very moment. Becoming aware of the church as a historical community, moving through time, and always conditioned in part by the concupiscence and active sinfulness of its members, prevents bifurcating the church into a sinful past and a holy present and future within history, and instead allows recognition of a sinful *and* holy journey in its historical past, present, and future, to be contrasted with its fully sinless, fully holy, extra-historical future. Without that framework, ecclesiology has to work to explain how a holy church yet contains the reality of human sin, and has more recently done so by positing "the church" as an entity distinct from its members, but that theological move makes incoherent an attempt by the church to apologize for actions that it did not commit.

Conclusion

Let me conclude this chapter by restating some of what I think we learn about the church through its self-expression in the "ordinary" liturgy of its eucharistic worship, and how the way the church prays on a regular basis does a better job of expressing its holiness and sinfulness in relation to these two issues. If the liturgy of the church is its "enacted ecclesiology," expressing what the church is, what in particular does that enacted ecclesiology say about the church's holiness and sinfulness? First, it suggests that the gathered assembly

participates in the holiness of God and can be called a "holy people," even if that holiness is conditioned by creaturely limitations and by the presence of sin. Faith in the "holy church" is a constant of liturgical language, and the community's belief in Christ's active work of salvation through baptism, Eucharist, and the other sacraments is rooted in the belief that holiness is a reality in the historical church, not an asymptotic, never-to-be-reached ideal.

Second, that assembly finds itself in the regular position of needing to confess its sin, its unworthiness before God, and can just as properly be referred to as a "sinful people." As we will see below, this requires careful interpretation, including distinctions, particularly for a Catholic perspective attentive to the teaching of the Council of Trent, between the reality of communion in holiness between all the members of the church and the negative sharing in each other's sinfulness that forms a kind of "anti-communion" within that same body. But the recognition that the assembly, when it gathers, consistently and regularly asks for forgiveness of its sins requires either some sort of attribution of sinfulness to the church or the invention of an entity called "church" distinct from the historical community of the faithful.

Third, the eucharistic liturgy does not speak about an entity called "the church" distinct from Christ's faithful gathered to hear the word and break the bread. That is not to limit "church" to one particular assembly, as the eucharistic prayers expand their vision to include every other comparable assembly, "from the rising of the sun to its setting," both contemporaneously and across the past and future of the church, all the way to our communion with the saints, with the Blessed Virgin Mary, and with Christ, the Head of the church. But, in the logic of the liturgy, while the church might be something *more* than any particular assembly in time and space, it is not something *different* from any particular eucharistic assembly. The "we" of the liturgy suggests that discussion of "church" as something different from that "we" or distinct from that "we," particularly if trying to separate out the holy from the sinful in that "church," is a theological error.

Fourth, the contradictory realities of ecclesial holiness and ecclesial sinfulness are neither static nor simply paradoxical, but exist in a mutually conditioning, dynamic relationship. With regard to sinfulness and holiness, the liturgy highlights the community's movement toward God and away from sin, through a variety of texts and ritual

actions. This suggests attention to the way the liturgy locates the assembly within time, both the individual biographies of each member, and the meta-biography of the church as it exists between the events of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and the eschatological completion of the paschal victory. The liturgy's movement from penitence to communion suggests that the present tense of the verb "to be" is too unwieldy as a tool for discerning the nature of the church; when discussing the church's participation in God's holiness and the weight of its continuing lack of holiness, one cannot say what the church "is" without simultaneously trying to say what the church was and will be. In a less clumsy way than much theology, the liturgy holds these two realities together within its framework of anamnesis and eschatological expectation.

All of these points will be addressed in greater detail, and with greater theological context, below. But I would like to end by returning, and asking the readers to return, to some of the concrete experience we have of the church in assembly as a firm foundation for the further, secondary theology to follow. When we gather in our parishes or other communities on the first day of the week, we do so in the hope and often (sometimes?) confidence that God has saved us and given us the grace of participation in God's life. We are being made holy. And, in fact, we can say that, in small and sometimes large ways, we have experienced something of the holiness of God through our experience of the holiness of our assembly. We experience that sanctity in the reception of the Eucharist; in the actions of individuals or groups in service to the reign of God empowered by our assembling; in the remarkable, extraordinary acts of grace we see in those we call our "saints," our "holy ones," both those who are well-known and the anonymous "saints next door," as Pope Francis names them in *Gaudete et Exsultate* (6–9); as well as in the just as extraordinary small acts of grace that occur in a family over dinner, in a small group meeting for prayer, in a food pantry keeping its lights on. The liturgy provides a space to give God thanks for allowing us to participate in God's holy life and provides refreshment, encouragement, and nourishment to continue to do so in the "liturgy after the liturgy"—that is, in the mission of the church.[50]

50. This phrase for the relation of worship and ethics was developed and popularized by Orthodox theologian Ion Bria. See Ion Bria, *The Liturgy after the*

At the same time, our experience of ourselves and of our assembly is always marked by the continuing reality of our failures, individual and collective. Gathered at the assembly, we gather not just with our saints, but with the sister or brother who hurt us the day before, with the pastor whose actions have left us wounded, with the parish council member who broke a promise to us, even with the guy who just cut us off in the parking lot before Mass—and with all of those that we have hurt in turn, known and unknown. The continuing reality of our distance from God's holiness is part of the reality of our prayer, and the *ordo* of that prayer suggests that repentance before God and neighbor, rather than denial of our failures, is not just necessary, but is part of the way that we grow into deeper participation in the holiness of God.

The wider communion of our particular parish or community, our particular assembly, with all of our fellow Christians struggling throughout the world at this time, as well as those who preceded us and the generations yet to come, is also constitutive of gathering. If we take that seriously, it can intensify both our awareness of the church's holiness and of its sinfulness. We invoke the saints, especially the Mother of God, and laud the holiness of God not only on our own but with the angels and archangels; our connection with this great "company of witnesses," and our hope to join them, is part of our faith that Christ has truly conquered sin and death. And yet, the shadow side of our communion in holiness is a kind of anti-communion in our ecclesial failures. Most often, this is thought of historically, with the invocation of the "Big Three" of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Shoah. More recently, we can ask about our ecclesial connection to the violence committed by Christians in Rwanda, to the indifference of Christians to the plight of migrants and refugees in Europe and along the U.S.'s borders, or to the sexual abuse committed or enabled by members of our own clergy. But to avoid flights of fancy or of guilt, we also need to think about our anti-communion with the more mundane failures of those around us—the "notorious sinners" of our parish and the routinely sinful

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Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Press, 1996).

face that stares back at me in the mirror are just as much part of the liturgical "we" as the saints, and just as much who the church is.

Finally, we can look at the concrete experience of journey. Again, the journey toward holiness is neither mechanical nor guaranteed, as God continues to give us, individually and collectively, the freedom to wander in the desert. But the experience of the church is often one of growth in holiness, which makes this journey less directionless wandering and more a pilgrimage with a destination. For some, this can be the flash of a conversion at rock bottom or at the end of one's life, but for many more, it is the slow, patient work in which the Holy Spirit works more organically, pruning the dead growth and nurturing the green shoots such that we produce fruit worthy of God. Here the liturgy, the "work" of the people to properly worship God, is also the "work" of God upon us to respond to the call to holiness. The liturgy helps name both aspects of our experience, our sinfulness and our holiness, and hold them together in a process of growth, a process which in each individual Christian is a microcosm and a building block of the becoming-holy-yet-still-sinful church God is shepherding through history.

CHAPTER 2

Sanctity, Sin, and Church

I would ask the reader to hold on to some of the impressions, memories, and questions that the previous chapter raised about how the liturgy expresses the church's holiness and sinfulness. At the same time, in this chapter, I am going to begin again to ask some of the same questions but from a different angle, a more traditional method for investigating a theological question. Here I outline some basic concepts that will be essential in further exploring how to understand sin and sanctity in the church. For readers of a more analytical mind, this might be a relief from the more meditative structure of the previous chapter; for readers for whom the narrative and memory of liturgy feel more vivid than reviews of terms and definitions, this chapter may require more attention and generosity. But my intention is to demonstrate that both chapters are necessary to this project. Even if, as I suggested above, liturgical expression of who God is and who we are in relation to God needs to be primary in our theological investigations, the secondary theological task of being as clear as possible about what we mean and how we mean it is irreplaceable in theology. If starting from the lived experience of the church, especially in its liturgy, is what helps keep theology true, attending to our concepts, their definitions, and their relationships is what keeps theology systematic.

From this perspective, then, this chapter focuses on three major concepts. First, it looks at the concept of "holiness" or "sanctity," including as hidden under such archaic English terms as "hallowed" and "to hallow." Second, we need a working definition of "sin" and "sinfulness." From the start, it's crucial to note that while these two concepts are related, they are not antonyms—"sin" is not the exact opposite of "sanctity," nor is "sinlessness" a direct synonym of "holiness." Given the way in which they are often paired, it's important

to start by alerting the reader not to think of these two clusters of concepts as simple opposites. The third crucial concept, and perhaps the most deceptively obvious, is "church." For many readers, all three of these concepts are like "the good" or "the just" in a Platonic dialogue—they seem obvious and without need of further definition, until an annoying person like a philosopher or a theologian begins to ask questions about it. In the subsequent chapter, I explore how these concepts are related in relation to the ideas of the church as holy and of the church as sinful. But to begin, we require some tentative, working definitions of these three concepts on their own.

Holiness

Few terms are as central to Christian thought and practice and yet as unclear in the minds of most Christians as "holiness." This is particularly surprising given how central to both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament is the testimony to God as "the Holy One," to Jesus Christ as "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24), and to the "holy ones," that is, the "saints" and "those called to be saints" to whom Paul addresses many of his letters. One could write a history of Christianity as a succession of attempts to "pursue . . . the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). This is especially true of individuals and communities whose pursuit of holiness has regularly inspired and shaken up the wider church in its complacency: these have included the early martyrs and the monastic movements; the medieval mendicant orders of Francis and Dominic; the Protestant Reformers and the Ignatian and Carmelite spiritual masters, in their similar desires for deep connection with Christ; and more contemporary expressions like the nineteenth-century Wesleyan Holiness Movement, twentieth-century Pentecostalism, and new religious communities in the Roman Catholic Church. In all of these groups we find a desire to draw closer to God, to be holy as God is holy (cf. 1 Pet 1:15). Whole books have been written about holiness in general,[1] and this short treatment is far less

1. Among which see, for a comprehensive and accessible Roman Catholic treatment, Donna Orsuto, *Holiness* (London: Continuum, 2006). From a Calvinist perspective, see John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

exhaustive. But I hope to highlight here some main points about holiness: First, a definition of holiness starts from God's awe-inspiring otherness and merciful presence. Second, creatures can share in God's holiness, but do so in ways limited by their difference from God. Third, creaturely holiness is not independent of God, but rooted in continuing relationship to God. Fourth, holiness includes ideas of ritual and moral purity, but is a more comprehensive reality that goes beyond questions of ethics. Fifth, the major distinctiveness of Christian ideas about holiness is its teaching of the presence of the holiness of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Sixth, and finally, holiness is an eschatological concept; that is, it can only be understood by reference to where we are located in time in relation to the fulfillment of God's plan for creation.

Holiness as God's Transcendence and Presence

It is not surprising, therefore, that we will run up again and again in this book against the limits not only of the author, but of human language in attempting to unpack the mystery of holiness, since to do so is to try to understand the mystery of God. In some ways, "holiness" is a kind of synonym of God's "God-ness." As Yves Congar writes, "It is not necessary to ask why [God] is holy, nor for what reason, or which other concept one could refer to, to explain that God must be called 'holy.' To say 'God' is equivalent to saying 'holy.'"[2] Surveys of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament show some of the diversity of biblical thought on holiness and changes over time both within the historical experience of the Jewish people and in the distinctively Christian thought of the New Testament. Two aspects of the holiness of God characterize biblical and traditional Christian ideas of God, God's "aweful otherness,"

For a contemporary Wesleyan Holiness survey, see Bernie A. van de Walle, *Rethinking Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017). For an excellent collection of scholarly essays on holiness in Scripture, history, and contemporary thought, see Stephen C. Barton, *Holiness Past and Present* (London: T & T Clark, 2003). For a classic text of spirituality that takes personal holiness as its central theme, see Donald Nicholl, *Holiness* (New York: Paulist, 1987).

2. Yves Congar, *L'Église Une, Sainte, Catholique et Apostolique*. Mysterium Salutis 15 (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 124–25.

and God's closeness to his people. The first idea—of God's mysterious transcendence, majesty, and power—is captured well in the passage from Isaiah 6:3 (and reprised in Rev 4:8) that grounds the *Sanctus* prayer of the Western Eucharist: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts"![3] Isaiah's immediate response is not joy, but fear for his life in the presence of God. A very loose yet not entirely inadequate transposition might be to understand the holy as the ultimate Other to creaturely existence, with a capital "O," so that we with Isaiah might cry, "Other, Other, Other is the Lord!" This sense of the terrifying otherness of God is a dominant component of the "idea of the holy" developed by the German theologian Rudolf Otto in his work of the same name, often paraphrased as the *mysterium tremendum* of God's holiness.[4] An encounter with the Holy One of Israel, as God is often named in the Hebrew Scriptures, stands in terrifying contrast to the normal and makes plain the difference between Creator and creature, between the Holy One and the limited, and possibly impure/sinful, creature.

At the same time, unlike some readings of Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, a scriptural understanding of God's holiness emphasizes, along with God's transcendent power and terrifying Otherness, God's condescension in reaching out to his creature in loving immanence and presence. Isaiah's lips are quickly purified by the burning coal; the Holy One of Israel in the pillar of cloud and fire saves his people from the Egyptians; God comes to rest with God's people in tent and temple; and, in Jesus, the Word of God "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:7). As Donna Orsuto summarizes this dialectic between transcendence and immanence, between distance and closeness, "God, the majestic and transcendent One, reaches out to men and women in mercy and draws them into a relationship of covenant love. This dialectic of majesty and availability in God characterizes a Scriptural understanding of holiness."[5] Stephen Barton further highlights how in the Bible the idea of God's holiness necessarily

3. For a more detailed treatment of Isaiah 6, see R. W. L. Moberly, "'Holy, Holy, Holy': Isaiah's Vision of God," in Barton, *Holiness Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 122–40.

4. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

5. Orsuto, *Holiness*, 10.

includes "a sense of both the incomparability of God in his transcendent otherness and yet also of the accessibility of God arising out of his covenantal love and mercy."[6]

Creatures, Including Persons, Can Share in God's Holiness

Because of the paradoxical availability of the transcendent God, we can then also talk about how creatures can be thought of as "holy." First, while God's holiness is "connatural" to God, an essential aspect of who God is, the holiness of creatures is entirely dependent upon God. As James Dunn writes, "Wherever the concept of 'holiness' appears in the biblical material, underlying it is the sense of the mysterious otherness and aweful power of the divine, of God, and that the holiness of people, places and things is essentially derivative from that primary source of holiness, 'holy' as related to the divine, to God."[7] Objects, persons, places, and times can be made holy, that is, can be hallowed and in doing so are separated from the nonhallowed, set apart from the everyday for the use of God. In English, the lack of use of the verb "to hallow" in our everyday language—we use it almost exclusively in praying the Lord's Prayer and in trying to explain the origins of Halloween—means that we might miss how often the same verb "to make holy" or "to holy" something (*qadash* in Hebrew, *hagiadzo* in Greek) pops up in the more Latinate forms "to consecrate" or "to sanctify."

To hallow something, therefore, is to make it other than "worldly" or "secular," that is, to remove it from "normal" usage in order to participate in some way in God's holiness. Barton uses a helpful spatial metaphor to connect biblical holiness with "an understanding of who God is and where God is to be found";[8] to hallow something or someone is to move them into a different location in relation to God. This is almost literally true with respect to some religious objects and buildings, such as the ritual objects used in Jewish temple worship as well as, for example, the consecration of a building or an altar

6. Stephen C. Barton, "Dislocating and Relocating Holiness: A New Testament Study," in Barton, *Holiness Past and Present*, 195.

7. James. D. G. Dunn, "Jesus and Holiness: The Challenge of Purity," in Barton, *Holiness Past and Present*, 169.

8. Stephen C. Barton, "Dislocating and Relocating Holiness," 195.

for use by the church. Times can be holy, whether the Sabbath, declared holy by God before all else in Genesis 2:3 and kept holy by Jewish observance,[9] or the Christian observance of the Day of the Lord, made holy by the resurrection of Christ that inaugurates a renewed creation.

Individuals can also be called "holy"; that is, they can be called "saints." Even if, as Donald Nicholl writes, "One truly holy person is worth more than any number of books about holiness,"[10] the number of books written about the saints could fill many libraries. Many Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, are used to thinking of the saints as primarily the "big names"—Mother Teresa, Ignatius Loyola, Thérèse of Lisieux, and above all the Blessed Virgin Mary. But as chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* makes clear, there is a "universal call to holiness" in the church, "that all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity,"[11] that is, to be saints. This is the language used by Paul when, for instance, he writes to the Corinthians as "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor 1:2), a practice brought back by some Protestant churches during the Reformation to help Christians recover a sense of the holy ones as possibly "us" rather than only "them." As Elizabeth Johnson writes in her feminist reclaiming of the dogma of the communion of saints, "Many a theologian begins discussion of the subject by acknowledging that even though the New Testament refers to the whole Christian community as saints, this will be set aside in order to consider paradigmatic figures, who then become in practice if not in theory the real saints. But this strategy woefully shortchanges the breadth and depth of Wisdom's strategy which is to lead all peoples on the path of life. Recovering a sense of the holiness of the ordinary person is a first step in unleashing the symbol to its full, comprehensive scope."[12] From this universal call to sainthood, a call

9. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

10. Donald Nicholl, *Holiness*, 5.

11. *Lumen Gentium*, 40. See also Brian Flanagan, "The Universal Call to Holiness and Laity in the Church," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32/2 (2016): 219–32.

12. Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 220.

to all the baptized living out their holiness in *lo cotidiano*—that is, in ordinary, day-to-day life[13]—and not only for the paradigmatically holy canonized by the church, we can draw both hope and challenge; as Raïssa Maritain famously wrote, "The only tragedy in life is not to be a saint."[14]

Creaturely Holiness Is Rooted in Relationship to God

All of this raises questions about how, if holiness is primarily an attribute of God, something other than God can begin to be "holy." At a first level, how can any creature participate in the Creator's non-createdness? If holiness is the awesome otherness of the divine, albeit an otherness always mercifully bending down to our level, then to call a person or an object "holy" seems to be a kind of category mistake. This leads to a profound truth about creaturely holiness that should precede any further consideration of the effects of sin upon holiness: namely, that creaturely holiness is a relational quality entirely dependent upon the grace of God. It is, in John Webster's words, "an alien holiness." Webster's Calvinist Christian tradition is particularly suspicious of any theology that would blur the difference between Creator and creatures or, even worse, make it seem that holiness is in some way a human accomplishment. In Webster's words, "Communicated holiness is not transferred or possessed holiness, but derived holiness; and the primary mark of creaturely holiness is thus its external orientation, its ordering towards God as its source and the object of its praises."[15] Without sharing Webster's suspicion of accounts that suggest holiness involves participation in the life of the triune God, we can still learn from his insight that "the Christian's sanctity is in Christ, in the Spirit, not *in se*; it is always and only an alien sanctity. Sanctification does not signal the birth of self-sufficiency, rather it indicates a 'perpetual and inherent lack of self-sufficiency.'"[16]

13. For a full treatment of the *mujerista*/Latina emphasis upon *lo cotidiano* in theology, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano*: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10 (2002): 5–17.

14. Cited in Orsuto, *Holiness*, 9. This theme is also highlighted by Pope Francis in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 6–9.

15. Webster, *Holiness*, 77.

16. Webster, 83.

Holiness therefore, especially with respect to holy people, ought not be thought of as a "something," as a possession or an object handed over to us like a twenty-dollar bill, but instead as the fruit of a continuing relationship, a relationship grounded in God's mission to us in Christ and the Spirit and in our graced response to God.[17] Donna Orsuto draws upon the Johannine image of the vine and the branches (John 15:5) to emphasize that it is by abiding in Christ that we are holy; just as the leaves have life only by remaining on the vine, Christians are holy in and inasmuch as they remain "in Christ," in Paul's phrase.[18] In a complementary way, one could highlight the emphasis upon the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in believers as the means by which God shares his holiness; the Spirit of God abiding in us empowers us to love God and neighbor as we ought, and in so doing to be holy as God is holy. Both of these ways of describing God's action emphasize the dependence of our holiness upon God's holiness not as a one-off event or magical moment, but as an ongoing relationship, the fruit of "God's transforming presence and activity within the person, itself enabled by the person's self-opening to God."[19] And thus creaturely holiness remains as dependent upon God as a leaf on its vine or as candlelight upon the flame.

Holiness in Relation to Purity and Morality

What does creaturely holiness look like, and what is its relationship to morality? Is being "a saint," as in its common use, merely a matter of being "a very good person"? Here in Second Temple Jewish thought and early Christian thought, we find a complex development that more closely links holiness with ethics than ritual practice, while at the same time without limiting holiness to moral virtue. In the earlier Hebrew

17. A serious critique of Webster would be that he misunderstands participation in holiness as possession of holiness, as though the language of participation invariably undermines the absolute dependence of the saint upon the Holy One. But in fact the opposite is true; see, for instance, John Zizioulas on the idea of creaturely participation in the divine life, in which participation begins and ends in God's initiative. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

18. See Orsuto, *Holiness*, 30–33.

19. Anthony Baxter, "Holiness and Sin," *New Blackfriars* 70 (1989): 508.

Scriptures, the idea of holiness focused upon the separation of objects and person from the everyday or mundane, or the purification of the same through separation from uncleanness or impurity. And yet we also find in the writings of the prophets and in Second Temple Jewish practice concerns about moral purity and ethical action as determinative of holiness. Jesus clearly challenged some forms of Jewish practice that focused upon ritual purity or cleanness to the exclusion of internal purity or "cleanliness of heart," and did so as a Jew debating the proper following of Jewish Halakic law rather than trying to undermine or do away with Torah observance in a supersessionist way.[20] Given some past interpretations of the New Testament that led to anti-Jewish readings of Jewish practice as "legalism" or "ritualism," it is important to emphasize that Jesus' preaching and practice is best understood within a Jewish debate over holiness, which almost always involved attention both to ritual questions of purity and impurity, and to ethical questions of morality and immorality.

And yet, following the research of James D. G. Dunn, it seems clear that in relation to purity/impurity and holiness, Jesus did come into conflict with both the Pharisees and with the broader norms of what Dunn and E. P. Sanders name "Common Judaism," that is, the average Jewish thought and practice of late Second Temple Judaism. Intra-Jewish factional polemic in this period regarding purity and impurity often involved the invocation of "sin" and "sinfulness."[21] According to Dunn, we can distinguish Jesus' thought and practice both from the more intensive ritual purity practices of the Qumran community and of the Pharisees, and from the less intensive purity concerns of "common Judaism." With regard to these practices, "Jesus was evidently clearly remembered as one who sat loose to many of the purity restrictions which regulated social behavior and communication."[22] Drawing upon the synoptic Gospels, Dunn concludes

20. For an account of the complexity of Jesus' ideas of holiness in relation to concepts of purity in Second Temple Judaism, see Dunn, "Jesus and Holiness: The Challenge of Purity," 168–92; and Richard P. Thompson, "Gathered at the Table: Holiness and Ecclesiology in the Gospel of Luke," in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 76–94.

21. Dunn, "Jesus and Holiness," 179.

22. Dunn, 187.

that "we cannot say with any confidence that Jesus called for a total disregard for the laws of clean and unclean. But he did indicate, in typically prophetic fashion, that moral impurity should be regarded as more serious than ritual impurity, and in effect called for a higher priority to be given to the moral purity of a person rather than to a person's ritual purity. . . . In the context of Mark 7 and Matthew 15, then, purity of heart is reckoned as so much more important than the ritual washing of hands as to render the latter inconsequential."[23] Jesus' teachings on Torah observance, then, led some of the early Jesus movement in his name to prioritize moral purity over ritual purity, even before the later dominance of Gentiles and marginalization of Jews in the early Christian church. Nevertheless, the complexity of Christians' diverse interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, of the Jesus movement's relations to Jews and post-Temple Judaism, and of the so-called parting of the ways between "Christianity" and "Judaism" preclude any simple conclusions on this issue.

Even if holiness remains deeply connected with moral virtue and purity of heart, in Christian theology "holiness" is not synonymous with "goodness." Holiness is the broader category, indicating the deep connection with God from which right action receives its source and inspiration. The limitation of "holiness" to "moral goodness" seems a rather modern phenomenon; for many centuries what was crucial to identifying the holiness of particular saints was less their moral qualities (often taken for granted) and more their ability to make present the power of God through healings or other miraculous events attributed to their relics.[24]

Christian Holiness: God's Presence in Christ and the Spirit

Such an idea of the holiness of the saints points to a development that, while deeply rooted in Jewish thought about the Holy One of Israel, is also the major point of difference between Christian ideas of holiness and those of modern Judaism and of other religious traditions. For Christian theology, the experience of God's presence in and through Jesus Christ, particularly in the mystery of his life, death,

23. Dunn, 188.

24. See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

and resurrection, and in and through the Holy Spirit, leads to a distinct understanding of where holiness can be found. This "dislocating and relocating of holiness," in Stephen Barton's terms, makes more of a difference in the distinctiveness of Christian ideas of the holy than any of the arguments around purity and morality.

The starting point for this change is the experience of the apostles and disciples who accompanied Jesus in his ministry, watched from afar (or, if male, mostly ran away) while he was executed, were astonished by his resurrection from the dead, and then, filled with the Holy Spirit, began baptizing in Jesus' name and preaching his message of the inbreaking reign of God. All of these experiences led them to re-imagine the location of holiness, centering it upon the person of Jesus Christ himself and upon the community filled with his Spirit. As Paul Minear writes, "In his death and resurrection, Jesus' holiness or sanctification became the measure and standard of all holiness, whether of places, times, things, or persons."[25] This experience intensified the paradoxical sense of holiness noted above—namely, that the entirely other Holy One was also the Holy One who draws close to God's people in mercy. Among many possible examples from the New Testament, two help to demonstrate this change in the location of holiness.

The first relates to the question of holiness's relation to purity and impurity; in Mark 5:24-34 (cf. Matt 9:20-22; Luke 8:43-48), on the way to heal Jairus's daughter, Jesus encounters another woman in need of healing, "who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years," without any relief despite having spent "all that she had." She came up to him in the crowd and touched his cloak, believing in his power to heal; Jesus feels "that power had gone forth from him" and searched to see who had touched him in the midst of the crowd. The woman comes forth "in fear and trembling"—as she ought to have done. For this was not simply a bold act of faith, but close to a suicide mission, since not only the Pharisee movement but the "Common Judaism" of the time would have been horrified at the possibility of a ritually unclean woman secretly defiling someone in the crowd. Rather than being defiled by her impurity, however, the power

25. Paul S. Minear, "Holy People, Holy Land, Holy City," *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 18.

of the holiness of God present in Jesus rushes out, purifying this woman like the hot coal on Isaiah's lips. In this story, and in similar stories about Jesus' touch cleansing lepers, about his eating with "known sinners" whose ritual and moral purity is in question, and about the shameful death he endured at the hands of the Romans, we see a "dislocation" of holiness from the traditional locales of the people, the land, the temple, and Torah onto the person of Jesus as *the* mediator of God's holy presence.[26]

Similarly, holiness is also relocated in the community through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the Luke-Acts account, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost empowers the small community of disciples to go out into the world, starting from Jerusalem, proclaiming Jesus' resurrection *and* making God's holiness present just as Jesus had—through mutual love, through prayer, through healing the sick and those with "unclean" spirits. It's because of this relocation of the presence of God's holiness in and through the Holy Spirit that 1 Peter is able to tell the assembly that they are no longer "no people" but "God's people": "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" being built into "like living stones" "into a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2). This new or renewed form of the presence of God's holiness in Jesus Christ and, through the Holy Spirit, in the assembly gathered in his name, is a determining factor in how Christianity understands holiness: when God's holiness is not only transcendent but immanent, that immanence has a definite location in Jesus and in the Spirit-assembled church.

Holiness Is an Eschatological Reality

The idea that the Holy Spirit empowers the church to be a new location of God's holiness in the world leads to a final crucial point about the nature of holiness in Christian theology: its eschatological character. In the previous chapter, I suggested how important for this topic the eschatological question of where we were on God's timeline is—that is, the question of where we are located in relation to the coming reign of God. Jesus' preaching of that coming reign of God and his disciples' conviction that his resurrection was not the end

26. See Barton, "Dislocating and Relocating Holiness," 197.

but the definitive beginning of that reign on the "eighth day"—that is, on the first day of a new creation—point to the early church's conviction that they were living "in between" two realities, the "already" of the reign of God inaugurated by Christ and the "not yet" to be endured as this current world continued to pass away. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit "poured out on all flesh" (Joel 2:28, quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17) was the effective sign of the beginning of this renewed reign of God, the redemption of Israel and, with and through Israel, of the wider Gentile world.

Holiness in Christian theology is therefore deeply eschatological, as the sign, the instrument, and the first fruits of the incoming reign of God. Barton sees this emphasis in the Our Father, pointing to the connection between the prayer that God's name be hallowed with the prayer that God's kingdom come: "The sanctifying of God's name is brought about by the breaking in of God's rule, proclaimed and enacted by Jesus, God's Son, and bringing healing and restoration to God's people."[27] "Holiness," Minear writes, "thus becomes an essential component of the new creation, the new age, in which it also represents a foretaste, a first fruit, of life in the age to come."[28] This will have major implications for our understanding of ecclesial holiness: holiness is always the breaking in of God's future of love, peace, and justice into our world yet in need of healing. Holiness is always a taste of the world to come in a world where it does not yet belong.

In summary, we have seen six points about holiness in general that will later be crucial for understanding the holiness of the church: that holiness, the paradoxical transcendence and closeness of God, is properly attributed to God alone and yet that creatures can, by grace, participate in God's holiness in varying degrees. Whether thought of in terms of purity or morality, holiness involves a separation of the holy from all that would hinder relation to God. And, in Christian theology, holiness cannot be understood without reference to the definitive encounters of the church with God's holiness in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, both of which point to the eschatological framework in which God's creation and salvation of the world take place.

27. Barton, 198.
28. Minear, "Holy People, Holy Land, Holy City," 23.

Sin

Like holiness, "sin" is a concept that is central to most forms of Christian life and practice and about which thousands of pages of wisdom have been written over the centuries by highly qualified theologians, biblical scholars, pastors, and wise spiritual teachers. In his book *God Is Not One*, religious studies scholar Stephen Prothero even identifies the concept of "sin" and salvation from sin as that which distinguishes Christianity from other forms of monotheistic religions.[29] One could write a full history on the development of Christian thought about the moral life through a study of the development of the concept of sin, yet to do so would require an additional book, and a different book than the one you are currently reading. But again here are some of the main ideas that I judge to be necessary in order to study the phenomenon of sin in relation to the church.

Sin Participates in Evil's Incomprehensible Nonbeing

In addition to the historical and scholarly complexity, thinking about sin evades the intellectual grasp just as thinking about the holy does, but for an entirely different reason. Thinking and speaking of God is limited by the fact that God is literally incomprehensible to the human mind; our speech is limited by the excess of meaning. Sin participates in the mystery of evil, which is caused not by an excess of meaning but by a lack of meaning; classical Christian theology names evil as a mystery not because it is so full of meaning, like God, but because it lacks meaning, like the square root of negative 1 or the idea of a square circle.

Evil, the broader category of which sin forms a part, has traditionally been defined in Christian theology not as a something, but as a nothing. This understanding grew especially out of Christian doctrinal development in its early centuries. Christians believe that all that is, is created by God and, starting from the opening chapters of Genesis, is created good. Unlike some other religious and philosophical worldviews, or some forms of Christian discourse declared to be "out of bounds" within Christianity—that is, to be heretical—orthodox Christian belief rules out any theology in which there is an

29. See Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

evil creator or two principles in creation, one good and one evil. For instance, a form of religious belief and practice called Marcionism, based in the teachings of a man named Marcion in second-century Rome, taught that the God found in the Hebrew Scriptures was different from God in the New Testament, and consequently rejected the entire Old Testament. In addition to the obvious problem of its anti-Judaism, Marcionism undermined Christian belief by teaching that all that was material and bodily was the lesser, even "evil," creation of the lesser "God" of the Old Testament, and all that was spiritual was the good creation of the God Jesus preached. Christianity rejected this form of dualism and others like it, and taught instead that all creation was the good product of a good God, starting from the opening chapter of Genesis in which creation is declared "very good" and the human being is made in the image and likeness of God. There are not two gods, or two creations, nor is any part of that creation, including the human body, either something evil or a divine mistake.

How, then, to explain the presence of evil in the world? If all that is, is good, then how can Christian theology deal with the lived experience of nongoodness? Christian teachers, and most prominently Augustine, whose spiritual journey can be read in some ways as a quest to understand the origins of evil and sin, argued that we ought not view evil, and sin as the kind of evil rooted in the human will, as having independent existence. Rather, it should be seen as the absence of a good that ought to be there. In this perspective, "ugliness" is not an independent reality, but rather is the absence of a beauty that ought to be present. So, for instance, the parks in my neighborhood are not always as beautiful as they ought to be—sometimes from poor design, sometimes because of litter, sometimes because the grass is underwatered and so has died, sometimes because it hasn't been mowed or trimmed recently, etc. In all these cases, regardless of whether something has been done or not done to these little parks, at a deeper level the "ugliness" is due to the park not being as beautiful as it could be. Note as well the tight connection between an "ugly" park and human sin, and that the ugliness is directly related to something humans have done or failed to do, which distinguishes evil as the absence of a good that "should" be there from finitude, the reality of a world that has limits—a park in my neighborhood in Washington, DC, is not ugly

because it doesn't have a palm tree or lemon tree appropriate to a different climate, but can be ugly because the apple tree that is there has been sinfully neglected or vandalized.[30]

This idea can be easily misunderstood as arguing that evil is not powerful, or "real" in the usual sense of the term, but that is not the intent; I can assure you, there is sometimes real ugliness in the parks near my house, and when we move from this simple example to the devastating effects of evil upon human lives and the world around us, the power of the absence of the good should prevent us from dismissing it as inconsequential or marginal. The point is that evil is always parasitic upon the goodness of existence, rather than a free-standing reality. In this viewpoint, you can't have an ugly park without an at least somewhat good park there to be marred by some ugliness. And, moving to more serious examples, evil, including the evil that results from human sin, is paradoxically entirely dependent upon the goodness of creation. This evil is no illusion but is a powerfully destructive force, so much so that Christian discourse about evil, about Satan as "the Adversary" to all that God wants for humans, and about sin sometimes veers toward the kind of dualism that this way of viewing the world intends to avoid.

A humble yet perhaps helpful way of imagining the nature of evil as a powerful, incomprehensible absence is a scene from a movie in my childhood, *The NeverEnding Story*. In the fantasy film, a force called the Nothing is destroying the world of the creatures who inhabit it; a large stone giant (technically, a rock-biter who eats granite) is trying to describe the destruction of his home and its beautiful lake: "Near my home, there used to be a beautiful lake, but then it was gone." Asked if it dried up or turned into a hole, he replies, "A hole would be *something*, naw, it was *nothing*. It just wasn't there anymore. *Nothing* was there anymore, not even a dried up lake." The nothing, this absence of being, isn't something that can be described easily, because it literally *isn't*. For Christian theology, evil is a kind of nothing, but like the Nothing of the film, it is a deeply destructive, powerful absence that causes real suffering in the world. Sin, as a human participation in that evil, is equally destructive, parasitic upon

30. For more on the distinction between evil and finitude, see Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 13–16.

the goodness of creation, and resistant to any intelligent explanation or description. As Neil Ormerod provocatively puts it, "Even God cannot answer the question of why someone sins. No satisfactory response can be found that would provide an intelligent answer to the question. The mystery of sin is a mystery even to God."[31]

Defining Sin

Many possible ways of defining sin have been put forward over the centuries. Augustine famously defined sin as "a word, deed, or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God," a definition taken up by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*.[32] Elsewhere Augustine referred to sin as "a turning away from God and a turning toward the creature."[33] Thomas Merton writes of sin as "the refusal of God's will and of his love . . . our refusal to be what we were created to be—sons [and daughters] of God, images of God."[34] Karl Rahner writes about sin within his theology most broadly as a free and definitive "no" to God.[35] More recently, the Reformed theologian Cornelius Plantinga defines it as "culpable disturbance of shalom."[36] Neil Ormerod writes of sins as "moments of failure" in our work of "making oneself through engagement with the task of making the world."[37]

The definitions given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provide a helpful summary of a few of the major features of sin. It states first that "[s]in is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity." It continues, "Sin is an offense against God. . . . Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away

31. Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, 17.

32. From Augustine's *Contra Faustum* XXII, 27, forming the basis for Aquinas reflection in ST I-II 71.6.

33. From Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio*, cited in Hugh Connolly, *Sin* (London: Continuum, 2002), 49.

34. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Image, 1963), 12.

35. See Ron Highfield, "The Freedom to Say 'No'? Karl Rahner's Doctrine of Sin," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 484–505.

36. Cornelius Plantinga. *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 12–18.

37. Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, 47–48.

from it" (1849–50). Many pieces of this definition are important, but I would like to highlight three: First, sin participates in the lack of reason and truth that characterizes evil; it literally makes no sense, even though it might seem so at the time and has very real, very sensible effects. Second, this definition has at its nucleus what I consider an excellent shorthand definition for future use: sin as a failure in love for God and neighbor. This failure, the direct opposite of the greatest commandment "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (see Matt 22:34-40), is at the root of human sinfulness. Third, failures in love of God and neighbor have direct, destructive effects upon relationship with God, self, and neighbor. The early chapters of Genesis provide a parable about these effects: the failure to love God expressed in Adam and Eve's transgression leads to Adam and Eve's alienation from God, from each other, from the natural world, and, in the further stories of Cain and Abel, and of the tower of Babel, we find a "domino effect" in which the failure of sin wounds human nature and human social life.

Speaking about Adam and Eve requires that we also highlight some of the ways in which Western Christian theology has further defined and distinguished sin throughout the ages, particularly in relation to the concept of original sin. While not original to him, Augustine is widely known as the most influential promoter of a concept of original sin, that is, the effects upon each human being of the "fall" of Adam and Eve, such that all of humanity is corrupted and requires healing in order to be freed from the reign of sin and death. The doctrine of original sin tries to explain our universal situation in which we find ourselves always already affected by the sins of the past; Neil Ormerod highlights four truths that the idea, and its expression in the Genesis 3 story, point to: first, that sin has been part of human history "from the beginning"; second, that the origin of sin is in human choices, rather than God's direct choice or in a dualist struggle between good and evil; that once sin becomes part of human history, no one is left untouched by its consequences; and finally, original sin is not the end of the story, but known in the process by which God continues to care for his creatures.[38] By comparison to

38. Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, 77.

sins as particular failures in love for God and neighbor, "original sin is called 'sin' only in an analogical sense: it is a sin 'contracted' and not 'committed'—a state and not an act."[39] Particularly if we think of original sin primarily as the cumulative context of human history, rather than as a literal "stain" or "disease" transmitted by sexual activity, as Augustine tended to express it, we can understand original sin as the result of our entry into a world that was disordered before we arrived; as victims of the disorder of our predecessors' choices, there is no point at which we are not affected by that disorder, and we have the tendency to reproduce it, often despite our best intentions, through our own personal sins.[40]

Sin Is Known Through Salvation

Talking about personal sin and original sin leads to a third important point—that the reality of sin is known most clearly only from the perspective of faith, that is, from within the process of being saved from sin. As Derek Nelson writes, "Sin has, built into it, a kind of good news."[41] Why is the idea of sin an object of revelation, and even "good news," when it seems both obvious and bad? Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith";[42] if that is so, why does it need to be revealed rather than simply observed?

The good news of both personal sin and original sin is the identification of our individual failures to love God and neighbor, and of the distorted context into which we are born and in which we tend to sin, as *accidental* to human nature and to the fullness of life to which we are called. I don't mean "accidental" in the way that a car accident happens, but "accidental" in the Aristotelian-Thomist sense that they do not belong necessarily to human nature. What Christians call "salvation," or might be further delineated into the process of our justification and sanctification in Christ, is the process of being forgiven for our personal sins and progressively freed from the context in which we tend to sin. And it is in and through salvation, in which

39. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 404.
40. See Ormerod, 79–84.
41. Derek Nelson, *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 1–2.
42. Quoted in Nelson, *Sin*, 36.

we see the possibility of being human yet without sin and so begin to learn sin as "unnatural," that we have some hope of being set free for a full human life that participates in the life of God. The reality of human evil, in ourselves and in our world, might be empirically observable; but the knowledge that, in the words of Plantinga, this is "not the way it's supposed to be" is good news almost unimaginable without God's intervention on our behalf.

As James Alison writes, "original sin was discovered as it became possible to leave it."[43] One powerful image for this reality is that sin is best understood in the process of leaving it, as seen in the wake of a boat leaving a shipwreck. God's plan for saving humanity from sin and elevating it to full participation in God is only really understood in the process of being saved; as in another famous story of being freed from ignorance, Plato's allegory of the cave, seeing the possibility of a richer and higher reality is made possible only in the exit. As Nelson writes, "Sin is known first, and best, in its defeat."[44]

Sin Remains a Reality in Christian Life

Nevertheless, another aspect of the Christian experience is that sin remains a reality in Christian life, even after the initial moment in which we are forgiven for our sins and freed through justification from the futility of original sin. In some ways the classic statement of this remains Paul's lament in Romans 7:15: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Further probing this understanding of original sin leads to a point of ecumenical divergence and, in the past two decades, a renewed but differentiated consensus, particularly with reference to the continuing effects of original sin in the life of the baptized Christian. Roman Catholic theology, especially under the influence of its penitential practice of individual oral confession, has in general taken "sins" in the sense of particular failures in love for God and neighbor as the primary reference for the term "sin"; a sin is first and foremost a personal action or failure to act. Lutheran theology, and much of the

43. James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 221.
44. Nelson, 35.

Reformation theologies influenced by Luther, focused first upon sin as the overall condition of alienation from God, brought about by Adam's fall, and upon the particular sins that result from our sinful condition as bad fruit does from a bad tree. This has sometimes led Catholics, especially Catholics drawing from the scholastic theologies of the medieval church, to so carefully distinguish different categories in relation to sin (original sin, the tendency toward sin known as "concupiscence," personal venial and personal mortal sins, etc.) that they neglect the common element of all these categories: the break in relation with God they derive from, contribute to, or expose. Similarly, Martin Luther's courageous, evangelical attacks on works-righteousness and self-justification by the human being before God led him and some Lutherans, in their charged rhetorical warnings of the overall power of sin, to blur many of these distinctions in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish the human as the victim of others' sinfulness from our own direct failures to love God and neighbor.

The differences between the two traditions are largely rooted in the question of how to understand the human person and the way in which the negative effects of original sin, the disorder that affects our moral existence, continues to exist even after the forgiveness of our sin. In the landmark Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed in 1999 by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, Catholics and Lutherans declared that they were "able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ" and "that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations," that is, no longer a cause for division between the churches (5). The declaration first outlines Catholics' and Lutherans'[45] shared faith that the human being is justified by God's grace—that is, "that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin's enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ" (22)—and that this is the result of God's saving grace rather than the result of human abilities. It then discusses the continued struggle against sin in the lives of the justified Christian:

45. And that of other Protestant churches, particularly those of the World Methodist Council and World Communion of Reformed Churches, who have since associated themselves with the Joint Declaration as also consonant with their teaching.

> We confess together that in baptism the Holy Spirit unites one with Christ, justifies, and truly renews the person. But the justified must all through life constantly look to God's unconditional justifying grace. They also are continuously exposed to the power of sin still pressing its attacks (cf. Rom 6:12-14) and are not exempt from a lifelong struggle against the contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam (cf. Gal 5:16; Rom 7:7-10). The justified also must ask God daily for forgiveness as in the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:12; 1 Jn 1:9), are ever again called to conversion and penance, and are ever again granted forgiveness. (28)

This shared statement of what Catholics and Lutherans can say together about the continued power of sin in the life of the Christian is then further explained with reference to an important difference between Catholic and Lutheran theologies, even if that difference is declared to no longer be church-dividing, and it regards the status of something called concupiscence."

"Concupiscence," from the Latin *concupiscentia* for desire, came to be used in Western theology, particularly under the influence of Augustine, to describe not just any desire but disordered desire, that is, uncontrolled or poorly controlled desire that leads one toward sin. Concupiscence is the aftereffect of original sin—what the Council of Trent named "an inclination to sin," a continued tendency to be vulnerable to the temptation to sin despite the freedom from sin given by justification in Christ. Like continuing to walk with a limp after a bone has been healed, or continuing to desire a drink after decades of sobriety, Christians, from this perspective, continue to struggle with the effects of original sin even after their justification.

As Neil Ormerod helpfully points out, the real difference is between Christians who identify original sin and concupiscence, and those who distinguish concupiscence as a continuing aftereffect of sin from "sin" proper. Ormerod argues that Augustine failed to differentiate between original sin and concupiscence; "he thus found it difficult to explain why concupiscence remained after baptism, which in faith he believed removed original sin."[46] Thomas Aquinas, with his different theology of grace, justification, and nature, taught that even though we are freed from the disorder of original sin through

46. Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, 72.

justifying grace in baptism, we still lack the fullness of grace in which our desires are properly oriented toward God; in Ormerod's reading of Aquinas, concupiscence is an issue not of active disorder in our desires (willing the bad) but rather of a lack of order (willing the good, but imperfectly). This allows Aquinas, and most of the Catholic theology that followed him, including the definitions at the Council of Trent, to view human nature as deeply injured by the fall, but not destroyed; as wounded, but still essentially good. "The drive to search for meaning, truth, and value remains in every human being, though because of concupiscence it may be swamped by other, more powerful drives and desires and so become ineffective in shaping the direction of our lives."[47]

Another crucial distinction in Catholic theology that makes it possible to talk about the continuing failures of the Christian in the moral life that occur even after justification is the distinction between "mortal" and "venial" sin. This distinction has fallen into disuse in much of Catholic life in North America, in large part, one suspects, because of the formation of a whole generation of mid-twentieth-century Catholics in a culture in which the "mortality" of various infractions was strewn about so promiscuously that it created an absurd leveling of moral consequences. The fact that missing Mass on Sunday or eating meat on Friday were considered, in the popular pre-Vatican II Catholic mind-set, just as mortal as murder or genocide made it difficult to recover the usefulness of the concept. Traditionally, "mortal" or, better, "deadly" sin[48] was defined by its "grave matter" as well as the "full knowledge and deliberate consent" of the sinner[49] and by its effect—the break in relationship between God and the person and loss of justification caused by such a knowing, willing, and serious failure of love of God and neighbor.

Venial sin, by contrast, is the way of describing smaller, "forgivable" acts (the origin of the adjective "venial") that are the day-by-day reality of most Christians, "the moral disorder of our everyday life."[50]

47. Ormerod, 73.

48. See Josef Pieper, *The Concept of Sin* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), 61.

49. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1857.

50. Karl Rahner, "Venial Sin," in *The Content of Faith* (New York: Crossroad: 1994), 535.

As in distinguishing sin proper from original sin, the Catholic tradition identified mortal sins as "sins" in the true sense, and venial sins as sin in an analogous sense. Thomas Aquinas compared the difference between mortal and venial sin to that between death and (curable) illness. That is not to say that venial sins are nothing; even if they do not break the relationship between the person and God, they weaken the baptized and make them more likely to slide toward mortal sin, especially when these sins become habitual. Further, especially in theologies that emphasize not only sinful acts but those acts as expressive of one's relationship with God, a relationship that remains opaque to our knowledge, habitual venial sins might, despite the lack of grave matter or intentionality, express the death of one's relationship with God. Such an awareness should caution against any underestimation of the presence and danger of venial sin that might have resulted in reaction to preconciliar overestimation of mortal sin.

Within this framework that distinguishes (mortal) sins proper, original sin, concupiscence, and venial sin, Catholic theology attempted to hold together the following teachings: First, by grace and not their own merit, baptized Christians are freed from original sin. Second, in this justification in Christ, the human being whose nature was wounded and disordered but not eradicated by original sin can receive the grace to live "sinless," that is, mortal-sin-less lives. Third, except by a special dispensation of grace, they continue to struggle with concupiscence, the disordered tendency toward sin that is a lingering effect of original sin. This experience of our disorder, and our continued status as "sinners" in this analogous sense, means that baptized Christians are, in another sense, already "saints" and are speaking the truth when, for example, they ask God to "forgive us our sins" in the Lord's Prayer, even if they are not "sinners" in the sense of having lost the grace of their justification in Christ.[51]

By contrast to this framework, the frameworks of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many other Protestant Reformers (as well as later Catholic Jansenism) held, first, with some writings by Augustine, that concupiscence was not simply an aftereffect of original sin but,

51. Cf. the canons of the 418 Council of Carthage, found in Denzinger 107 and 108.

with daily or venial sins, the continued presence of original sin in the Christian, and, second, that therefore justification was the forgiveness of original sin, rather than its removal. By thinking of the continued presence in the Christian of concupiscence and of venial sins as "sin," in contrast to Catholic theology's distinction between mortal sin, venial sin, and concupiscence, these theologies emphasized the radical damage caused to human nature by sin; in their more radical forms, as a result of the fall, even the justified Christian *non posse non peccare*—they are not able *not* to sin. God's justifying grace is primarily one of forgiving and overlooking the sin of one who remains, in a famous Lutheran phrase, *simul justus et peccator*—simultaneously justified and yet a sinner. For Luther, this was the amazing Good News of the Gospel—that even as he failed in his efforts to avoid sin, he was graciously forgiven and justified by God through Christ's obedience to the Father; as in the sharing of possessions and of debts in a marriage, Luther argued, Christ takes on our sins, and we are given a share in his benefits. But this is a much more pessimistic view of the potential of postlapsarian human nature to avoid sin, or to be holy, than found in most Catholic theology then and now.

Catholics and Lutherans, as expressed in the 1999 Joint Declaration, no longer think of these differences as church-dividing. "When Lutherans say that justified persons are also sinners and that their opposition to God is truly sin, they do not deny that, despite this sin, they are not separated from God and that this sin is a 'ruled' sin" (29). And Catholics, in distinguishing concupiscence from sin "in the proper sense," "do not thereby deny that this inclination does not correspond to God's original design for humanity and that it is objectively in contradiction to God and remains one's enemy in lifelong struggle" (30). Furthermore, even many Catholic theologians have questioned the limitations of this framework, with its focus upon particular acts rather than upon the overall state of one's relationship with God, and upon individuals rather than the social context and consequences of their sins. Why, then, have I spent such time highlighting this difference?

I have done so because these differences in how communities express the reality of justification and sin lead to very important differences in how we discuss the continued reality of sin and its effects within the life of the Christian church. This traditional Catholic

theology of justification and concupiscence grounds the possibility, indeed the expectation, that the justifying grace of God will allow at least some of the baptized, some of the time, if always through God's grace, to persevere in freedom from deadly sin. That state of sinlessness is never based upon one's own efforts or merits, never to be presumed, is not guaranteed to persevere, and is not the usual experience of most Christians whose concupiscence leads them regularly to actual, venial sins. But the traditional definition of "sin" precludes using the Lutheran formula of simultaneity, of the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*, without attention to the differences in how different communities and their theologies understand "sin" and "justification"; at a given point in time, working from a Catholic limitation of *peccator* to those whose failure of love has cut them off from God, the person is either justified *or* a sinner. *A fortiori*, then, application of the Lutheran paradox to the church—that is, describing the *ecclesia* as *simul juxta et peccatrix*—will not, within Catholic theology, solve the mystery of the continuing effects, and reality, of sin in the church.[52]

Furthermore, we can see here the need for precision in the terms "sin," "sinner," and "sinful," both in understanding the individual person and in understanding the church. How we define "sin" is crucial. We can distinguish the inherited condition of separation from God (original sin), a general tendency toward failure (concupiscence), an act that is a particular failure of love of God and neighbor (sin), such failures that occur regularly, even daily, yet without our full intention to rebel against God (venial sin), and such a failure that is deadly in the sense that it fatally breaks the relationship between the individual and God (mortal sin). Furthermore, the question of who is a "sinner" or whether an individual, community, or situation is "sinful," also needs to be clarified. To follow the same progression of terms, one can see the range between a "sinner" as any unjustified, unbaptized individual still imprisoned in original sin, through anyone still struggling against concupiscence, to those who need to

52. As, for instance, in Peter Vogt, "Ecclesia Simul Justa et Peccatrix: Speaking About the Holiness of the Church from a Reformation Perspective," in *Caritas et Reformation: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, ed. David M. Whitford (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2002), 179–89.

ask daily for forgiveness for their small yet real failures, all the way to the individual who has knowingly and deliberately broken relationship with God. Without further definition, "sinner" is too blunt an instrument to be used to describe a particular individual, and, by extension, we shall see their limitations in describing the reality of sin within the life of the Christian church.

Sin Is Always Social

Discussion of the church leads to a final component of a theology of sin that needs attention as we address the church—namely, the social nature of sin. This is true in two ways. First, this is true in the immediate sense that most sin involves not only failure to love God but also failure to love neighbor. With some exceptions, many of the times that we fail to love God occur in a particular failure to love another. But particularly in the past fifty years, theologians and magisterial Catholic social teaching have called greater attention to a second way in which sin is social, to what they name social sin, that is, to the location of sin not in individual acts but in our communities and social structures, in a manner analogous to the diffuse presence of original sin in human history. This has obvious implications for how we discuss the presence of sin and sinners in the church.

The first aspect of sin, its effects upon our relations with each other, has a long history in Christian theology, rooted in both the Old and New Testaments' emphasis upon the social effects of human sin; to return to Genesis 3, the personal acts of Eve and Adam drastically affect not only their relationship with God, but with each other and creation. One can even point to theologies that conceive of sin primarily as isolation or relationlessness, in which "to be closed off from, or to be in distorted relationships with, those partners whom God has given me is both a consequence of sin and sin itself."[53] In such a conception, while sin is always personal, it is always also social. Connolly expresses it well as he writes, "Similarly the social dimension of sin can never be construed as some kind of afterthought, for it is an essential component of the '*mysterium iniquitatis*.' To be a relational being means that the human person cannot achieve his or

53. See Nelson, *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 58–63.

her true realization except in communion with the other. Sin is an egocentric act or attitude, therefore, because it is a refusal to open the 'heart,' to reach out and to love."[54]

More particularly, however, especially as developed by liberation theologians in the twentieth century, and as cautiously but progressively adopted in teaching documents of the Catholic Church,[55] the idea of "social sin" investigated how personal sins can lead to structures or systems that can be conceived as "sinful" and that have power and persistence beyond that of a particular personal act. The work of Gustavo Gutiérrez and other liberation theologians was key here in launching this trajectory; against an overly privatized understanding of personal sin, Gutiérrez wrote, "Sin, the breach with God, is not something that occurs only within some intimate sanctuary of the heart. It *always* moves into interpersonal relationships, and hence is the ultimate root of all injustice and oppression—as well as of the social confrontations and conflicts of concrete history."[56] In his and other liberation theologians' critiques of structures of oppression in their particular contexts, they highlighted how sin was not only a phenomenon of particular individual acts, but could metastasize, gaining power and permanence in structures by which individuals participated in and perpetuated injustice and domination.

This usage is foreshadowed in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of Vatican II, which highlights that "human beings are prone to evil, but whenever they are confronted with an environment where the effects of sin are to be found, they are exposed to further inducements to sin, which can be overcome only be unremitting effort with the help of grace" (25). In later texts, particularly in the documents of the Latin American Bishops' Conference meetings at Medellín and Puebla, and in John Paul II's texts *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984) and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), the concepts of "social sin," "sinful structures,"

54. Connolly, *Sin*, 106–7.

55. See Margaret Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002): 132–52; and Kristin E. Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 410–36.

56. Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, quoted in Nelson, *Sin*, 107.

"structures of sin," etc., became part of the vocabulary of Catholic social teaching.

In the development of the concept, Catholic theologians, and especially Catholic magisterial documents, have taken care to distinguish personal sin, sometimes referred to as "actual sin" or "sin in the proper sense," from social sin, which is viewed as sin by analogy to a personal sinful act. In this way, as Daniel Finn highlights, social sin is analogous to personal sin in a way similar to the way original sin is "sin" analogously; both social sin and original sin result from particular acts of personal sinful choice, and yet create a context that tends toward further sinful acts. "Social structures are not conscious agents and so they cannot sin in any literal sense. But since they have a causal effect through the choices made by persons within them, they can be described as sinful when the restrictions, enablements, and incentives those persons encounter encourage morally evil actions."[57] Magisterial theology under John Paul II and Benedict XVI was suspicious of forms of liberation theology and related conceptions of structural evil that seemed, in their view, to remove individual agency from situations of sinfulness in a deterministic way. While likely an unfair charge of most liberation theologians' understanding of sin, the concern points to an important disputed question in contemporary theology that stands at the heart of this investigation: is there such a thing as collective agency, or is agency uniquely personal? In what ways can structures or institutions be described as "sinful" without being able to "sin" in the way a personal agent can? And, to take a step back, as Finn does, how do we define a social structure or a collectivity to begin with?

Further treatment of these questions will have to wait until chapter 4 below, when we look at the nature of the church as a social structure and consider possibilities of describing it as "acting," as "sinning," and as being "holy" and "sinful" in that light. But it is important to highlight here the social nature of sin, both in the classical sense of its social effects and in the growing recognition that human life is embedded in social structures and contexts that, like original sin, condition individuals' moral agency. Just as we will talk about the

57. Daniel K. Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?" *Theological Studies* 71 (2016): 136–64, at 154–55.

church as a "communion of saints/communion in the holy," we need to highlight here the original-sin-like phenomenon of a "communion" or, better, "anti-communion" of shared human sinfulness that is larger in scope and effect than the personal sins of any individual actor. Christina Astorga helpfully outlines the connection between personal sins and the ongoing effects of social sin: "There is an intrinsic connection between personal sin and social sin, because structural sins are always linked to concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them, and make them difficult to remove. They spread, grow stronger, and become the source of sin. The evil found deep in social structures is an inducement to sin. . . . Sin has come about from the accumulation of sin in history. This sin has an infectious power of entrapping all in a profound tendency to sin."[58]

In summary, then, this section has not provided a full theology of sin, nor answered all of the possible theological questions that would be addressed in such a theology. But I have highlighted some characteristics about sin that I will be drawing upon to address the phenomenon of sin in relation to the Christian church. I will be working from a definition of sin as a "failure in love for God and for neighbor," a definition that remains opaque to understanding because of its participation in the irrationality of evil, that requires distinctions between various concepts of sin and sinfulness, and that is best known through the good news that we are in process of being saved from sin. Nevertheless, I also discussed the continuing presence of sin in the Christian life and some contrasts between classical Catholic and Protestant ways of describing that continuing presence, as well as the more recent attempts to explore the reality of "social sin," that is, the presence of sin and/or the results of particular sins embedded in particular institutions or social structures.

Church

The third and final "big concept" that requires some preliminary definition is the idea of "the church." As much as "holiness" and

58. Christina Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 218, cited in James Keenan, "Raising Expectations on Sin," *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 179.

"sin," "church" is a concept whose definition far exceeds the space allowed for it here. Furthermore, since much of the remainder of this book will be focusing on how we understand the church, many of the positions I identify here will be further treated and refined in the course of the subsequent chapters. But, as with holiness and sin, I need here to outline some of the starting definitions and assumptions that will ground my argument in the coming chapters.

Church as Assembly of the Faithful

There is an inevitable circular quality to attempts to define the word "church"—how one defines the church will drive further attempts to understand it, and attempts to understand the church invariably deepen, and sometimes complicate, one's initial definition. Furthermore, attempts to define the church occur at various levels of Christian discourse: we find reflection upon the church in the Christian New Testament and, depending upon how one understands its continuity and discontinuity from the Jewish people, in some readings of the Hebrew Scriptures; liturgical texts, like those discussed in chapter 1 but in many other places, including baptismal formulas and creedal statements, express understandings of the church; in patristic literature we find a fondness for describing the church in striking, inspiring ecclesial metaphors, a fondness recapitulated in the series of images for the church listed in the opening chapter of *Lumen Gentium*; as well as more specialized canonical and systematic theological treatments that attempt to rein in and systematize some of this liturgical and patristic exuberance with more clear and distinct concepts of the church, its mission, its nature, its members, etc. Finally, we have a broad spectrum of popular uses of the term "church" both inside and outside of the Christian community that form an additional effective context for its use.

At the broadest level, a starting definition of the church that was a favorite of Thomas Aquinas is the church as the "*congregatio fidelium*," the "congregation" or "assembly" of the baptized faithful. Arguably this definition transposes nicely some of the nuances of the Greek word *ekklesia*, "assembly," that the Scriptures and early church used to describe itself, as well as the Hebrew *qahal* that was translated as *ekklesia* in the Greek Septuagint. While perhaps tending to

emphasize the church's nature more than its mission, defining the church as the "assembly of the faithful" starts by defining the church as a collective entity, assembled by God, and composed of individual women and men from across time and space who are brought into communion with each other through their shared communion with God. As Joseph Komonchak states in underlining the foundational nature of this definition, defining the church as the *congregatio* or *convocatio fidelium* provides "more than a nominal definition of the Church, an identification of that to which the word refers. It approximates a real definition, that is, a statement of what constitutes and distinguishes the gathering of human beings known as the Church. It is a primary notion, both sociologically and theologically."[59]

Starting from this understanding as primary also helps to bar the way to some misunderstandings of the term church that would be less helpful in attempting to understand the assembly of the faithful as holy and as sinful. It rules out defining "church" primarily in terms of "the leadership of the church" or "the Vatican" or "the Roman Catholic magisterium." This usage occurs regularly in popular discourse within and without the bounds of Christian life, from news channels reporting what "the church says about X" to individual Christians who describe themselves as disagreeing with "the church." Without denying the important role of ecclesial leaders and teachers, particularly within the Catholic context, the limitation of the term "church" to "institutional leadership" skews common understanding in defining church as "they" or "them" instead of as "we" or "us."

The Church Is a Complex Reality

Another related mistake would be to artificially divide the "church as institution" from the less tangible reality of the church as the "mystical body of Christ" or the "people of God." *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, teaches that such a separation is a mistake. Referring to these two aspects of the church, it states, "The society equipped with hierarchical structures and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and

59. Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), 31.

the spiritual community, the earthly church and the church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality comprising a human and a divine element" (8). Discussing the church as the "assembly of the faithful" intends to include the intangible and properly spiritual properties of the church as those properties subsist in a concrete, historical society with its own history, structures, and institutional realities. It is important here to highlight that the complex human and divine elements in the church can be distinguished in thought but ought not be divided into two different churches, both in theory and in practice.

This should also indicate some of the difficulty we will encounter in our attempts to think about the church. First, we will encounter the difficulties of understanding the church as a complex human social reality. All of the disciplines of the social sciences—political science, sociology, anthropology, even economics—and philosophy and social theory more broadly, can be used to investigate this reality, with the caveat that these auxiliary disciplines are not often in agreement with each other and therefore require careful, critical use.[60] In addition to the complexity of a human social reality, we then face the difficulty of speaking about the mystery of the reality of God inasmuch as the church lives by and from God's grace, a mystery because its intelligibility exceeds the grasp of our minds, and the contrasting mystery of sin in the midst of the church, which we fail to understand fully because of its lack of intelligibility. Finally, we have the difficulty of how to understand the interactions between nature, grace, and sin in the continuing life of the church, and so it is no small challenge to begin to speak about this complex reality we call the church.

Lumen Gentium itself attempts to begin to address at least one part of that complexity, the question of the relation between nature and grace in the church, between the church as a human social reality and the church as a "creature of grace," as a social reality that participates

60. Though without the epistemological pessimism of John Milbank, who suggests that the social sciences are inherently corrupted by their origins in non-Christian or actively anti-Christian assumptions. See Joseph Komonchak, "Foundations in Ecclesiology," ed. Fred Lawrence, Suppl. issue, *Lonergan Workshop* 11 (1995), and Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 31–60.

in the justifying and sanctifying economy of salvation. *Lumen Gentium* continues its discussion of the unity of the church's "human and divine" elements by a christological analogy: "For this reason the church is compared, in no mean analogy, to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature [of Christ], inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living instrument of salvation, so, in somewhat similar fashion [*non dissimili modo*], does the social structure of the church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (see Eph 4:16)" (8).

This christological analogy was used by ecclesiologists to explore the nature of the church throughout the twentieth century.[61] With this analogy, ecclesiologists have also thought through "ecclesiological heresies" comparable to the classical christological heresies that the creeds formulated by the early councils of the church excluded, particularly in the definition at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In this way, theologians have talked about the dangers of an "ecclesiological Monophysitism" or "ecclesiological Docetism," and we might speak, though less elegantly, of a kind of "ecclesiological naturalism." Briefly, christological Monophysitism was condemned as a position in which the human nature (*physis*, in Greek) of Christ was so absorbed or overwhelmed by the divine nature of the Second Person of the Trinity that there was no longer any human nature left; like water into which a tea bag has been placed, the human nature of Christ was so infused by divinity that there was no human nature left. Similarly, christological Docetism held that Christ's humanity was an appearance only and that the experience of Christ was more a matter of a theophany, God acting *as if* God were in a human form, rather than incarnation. In contrast, Chalcedonian Christology maintained that two distinct natures, human and divine, subsisted in the one person of Christ without mixture or confusion. Applied to the church, ecclesiological Monophysitism refers to the idea that because God is present in the church through the gift of the Holy Spirit and the grace by which God founded and sustains the church, the human elements are accidental or so infused by grace as to lose their human limitations.

61. For a crucial example, see Yves Congar, "Dogme Christologique et Ecclésiologie: Vérité et limites d'un parallèle," in *Sainte Église* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963), 69–104.

Similarly, a kind of ecclesiological Docetism would suggest that the church is not really a human institution, but a purely divine institution merely appearing to be human. This can express itself in a kind of misguided devotion to the church in which the church is so fully a divine entity that it can do no wrong and is not limited or changed by the limitations of its members. Such a church is a church outside of history. A stereotypical temptation of Catholic and Orthodox Christians, ecclesiological Monophysitism and Docetism lead us to conflate the church with the coming reign of God and to exclude a priori the created limitations and sinful tendencies of its members as incidental to its reality.

At the opposite extreme, we find a mistake more difficult to name, but which we might call a kind of "ecclesiological naturalism" that denies the real, continuing presence of God's grace to the church.[62] In such a view, the church is yet one human organization like any other, with all of the possibilities and flaws of any human society. Such an approach could come from an agnostic or atheistic denial of the possibility of grace acting in and through a human community in history, or from a relatively pessimistic theology of the invisibility of the true church, in which the visible, institutional community is a necessary, but flawed, framework in which the "true church" can sometimes be found. In either case, such a "sociological reduction" of the church's complexity provides an incomplete theological analysis of the church. While ecclesiology must of necessity draw upon the social sciences in order to study the church, if ecclesiology ignores the church's unique characteristics as the product of grace, or a priori excludes the possibility that it has intelligibility beyond the scope or abilities of the unaided social sciences, then it fails in its task of under-

62. The difficulty comes, in part, because the obvious possible alternative heresy to Monophysitism would be "Nestorianism" or, better, "dyophysitism," that is, the Christological position in which the divine and human natures of Christ were joined but remained distinct, such that what could be said about the word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, could not automatically be said about the human Jesus of Nazareth. But when it comes to the church, the analogy breaks down, in that here the presence of God's grace through the Holy Spirit in the church is not a hypostatic union, nor are Christians personally or collectively "united" with the Holy Spirit, and so the church *is*, in fact, a kind of Nestorian reality. Cf. Congar, "Dogme Christologique et Ecclésiologie."

standing this complex reality. In both directions, the complex reality of the church requires us to distinguish, without dividing, the divine and human elements that come together to form one church.

The Church and the Reign of God

A third set of basic assumptions about the church revolves around the question of the church's relation to the reign of God and by extension to the church's eschatological "already-not yet" status. The most famous expression of stark contrast between the two might be Alfred Loisy's remark that "Jesus proclaimed the kingdom; what arrived was the church."[63] While it seems like Loisy intended something different and more positive than the way that statement is often used as a cynical slogan, it nevertheless does a good job of distinguishing the church as the sacrament of the reign of God from that reign itself. *Lumen Gentium* describes the church as "the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery" (3) and as "the seed and the beginning of that kingdom" (5). The church, then, which "longs for the completed kingdom" (5), participates in the eschatological reality in which the reign of God has really and truly begun in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and yet remains on the way toward the fullness of justice and peace, toward the victory of God over sin and death, that Jesus proclaimed in his ministry. The presence of the Holy Spirit in and through the church pushes or, better, pulls us forward toward the fullness of the reign of God.

The church is called to be the reality, in mystery or as foretaste, of the kind of human social life that obtains within the reign of God. When it is holy and transparent to the work of the Holy Spirit that guides it, the church is what saved humanity looks like—it is the salvation not of individuals only, but of our communal existence from our sins and for the fullness of God's presence. So the church is not solely instrumental in relation to the reign of God, as though it were only a means to heaven or a method to follow to escape hell, but is also meant to be how we already participate in the reality of God's reign. One way of asking about this is to ask whether the church will exist in heaven, or whether the church will exist in the reign of God.

63. Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 166.

In one sense, it obviously won't—there won't be a need for a parish hall or a bishop's chair, nor will there be a need for the mediation of the sacraments in order to encounter Christ, when we see God "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). But in another sense, the church, the assembly of the faithful, marked by its holiness and its love for God and for neighbor, *is* what the reign of God is; the church is, and will fully be, what Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard called "the-people-that-God-wants," the kind of human community in right relation to God and neighbor that God has dreamed of and made possible. So in addition to being a means or instrument to form us into that fully holy assembly, the church as it moves through history is also meant to be encountered as a partial fulfillment of God's plan for humanity, a place where love of God and neighbor is already experienced "through a glass darkly."

Given this forward-looking trajectory, then, it is impossible to speak about what the church *is* without simultaneously speaking about what the church *hopes to be*. This temporal situation means that the church always has to be understood by reference back in time to the history of Israel and the events of Christ's life, and looking forward in history to the completion of the victory already begun in Christ. Consequently, statements about the church always require qualification or clarification; we can talk about what the church is now, in part, or of what the church is, in mystery, or about what the church is, in relation to what the church will be. But this means that blanket statements about what the church "is" without further clarification will be inadequate for describing it as a reality. It also means that the way in which human sin hinders the church in its mission to bring the world closer to the reign of God, or makes it less effective as a sacrament of a world-made-right, raises deeper questions about the continuing reality of sin in the church than the simple accounting of individual moral actions. As we will see, careful attention to the church's location in the eschatological tension of the "already" and the "not yet" will be a key component of how we can understand the phenomena of ecclesial holiness and ecclesial sin and failure.

A Church of Churches

A fourth, and final, aspect of the definition of the church that I will be drawing upon in what follows is an understanding of the

church as not a monolithic, worldwide entity such that the only relevant terms are "the church" and "its (individual) members." Rather, the church is a communion of local churches, particular to their times and their places and yet connected across the distances of different times, places, cultures, and ways of living out the Gospel of Christ.

This conception of the church goes back to the earliest days of the church, when, for example, Paul wrote letters to "the church of God that is in Corinth" and to "the church of the Thessalonians"; it was systematized in the patristic understanding of the wider Christian church as the communion of local churches, each assembled together under the leadership of a bishop and presbyters. In recent years, particularly under the heading of "communion ecclesiology," theologians have recovered this vision of the importance of each individual local church.[64] In *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council taught that "it is in and from these [the particular churches] that the one and unique catholic church exists" (23). Such a recovery was not without controversy; in the early 2000s, Cardinal Walter Kasper and then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger carried out a cordial but significant debate over the question of the priority or the simultaneity of the universal church and the particular churches;[65] and in more recent years use of some versions of communion ecclesiology to either silence debate over the nature of the church[66] or to prioritize ecclesial unity over all other values[67] have raised questions over the long-term utility of "communion ecclesiology" as an ecclesiological model or strategy.[68]

64. See Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); Susan Wood, "The Church as Communion," in *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 159–176; and Christopher O'Donnell, "Communion—Koinônia" in *Ecclesia: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 94–98.

65. For an overview, see Killian McDonnell, "The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 227–50.

66. See Gerard Mannion, "From the 'Open Church' to Neo-Exclusivism?" in *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 43–74.

67. See Scott MacDougall, *More Than Communion* (London: T & T Clark, 2015).

68. See also Brian P. Flanagan "Communion Ecclesiologies as Contextual Ecclesiologies," *Horizons* 40 (2013): 53–70.

But despite reasons for care in how and why we deploy the categories of communion ecclesiology, the "vision and version" that I find most helpful in illuminating the nature of the church is that outlined by the late Catholic ecclesiologist and ecumenist Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, OP.[69] Tillard's work was rooted in careful biblical and patristic scholarship, and outlined a communion ecclesiology rooted in an appreciation for the eucharistic assembly as the starting point for understanding the church. The titles of two of his major books, *The Local Church* (1995) and *Church of Churches* (1987), evidence two key elements of his thought: the locality of the church and the constitution of the wider church across time and space by the communion of those churches. In *The Local Church*, Tillard emphasizes how each local church[70] takes root and grows not only in a neutral physical place, but in a particularly complex cultural and historical geographical location. That sense of location co-constitutes the church in its particular incarnation of the Gospel, as well as the particular struggles or limits of that community in its life as church; nevertheless, for Tillard, such a place is not a neutral container for Christian life but a positive good, and so the reality of the church is one in which the distinctiveness of each local church is a contribution to the overall communion and history of the church that can only be made by the church in that time and place—to use a more recent phrase of Pope Francis, each local church is an irreplaceable side of a larger polyhedron.[71]

And yet, at the same time, and contra some critics who would see in such a schema a form of congregationalism in which the universal

69. For Tillard, see Christopher Ruddy, *The Local Church: Tillard and the Future of Catholic Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 2006); and Brian P. Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity and Salvation* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

70. Note that in Roman Catholic and Orthodox terminology, the phrase "local church" generally refers to a diocese, rather than a parish or congregation.

71. See, for instance, Francis's remarks to the Thirty-Sixth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus: "Our image of globalization should not be the sphere," Pope Francis reflects, "but the polyhedron. It expresses how unity is created while preserving the identities of the peoples, the persons, of the cultures." Cited by Michael Mohr, "Pope Francis: The World Is Not Round," *The Jesuit Post*, April 24, 2017. Available at https://thejesuitpost.org/2017/04/pope-francis-the-world-is-not-round/#fnref-16713-1.

church were simply a loose confederation of previously existent churches, Tillard also emphasizes the co-constitution of each local church by its communion with the apostolic church of Jerusalem, and with all of the other churches spread across time and space. Rather than prioritize the universal church, however, Tillard tries to recover a sense that the individuality and distinctiveness of local churches need not threaten the bonds of unity but, instead, is much more likely to incorporate the varied goods of different human cultures instead of allowing one church's vision to dominate or oppress that of others. Mutual recognition of different incarnations of the Gospel, Tillard's work suggests, allows the church to model the mutual love of others in and through their differences that is one aspect of the reign of God and human salvation—a salvation in which differences and formerly divided peoples are reconciled into one body, one diverse family again.

What this means for our discussion of holiness and sin, then, is that we should avoid the pitfall of thinking of "the church" only or primarily in the sense of the "universal" church spread throughout the world. That universal *congregatio fidelium* takes shape in and through more particular *congregationes*, and so our treatment of ecclesial sin and holiness needs to take account of these forms of church, not just the church at that widest level. And so, just as studying a society requires looking at its "intermediate institutions," the various forms of church—regional, diocesan, parochial and congregation, even domestic—should be part of what we study in trying to understand the holiness of the church.

With these three working concepts, therefore, of sanctity, sin, and the church, we can begin to address how they are related. First, in the next chapter, we will explore how to talk about the sanctity of the church and the sinfulness of the church, and then, in chapters 4 and 5, we will look at how to make sense of the paradoxical reality of the church that is both holy and sinful.

CHAPTER 3

I Believe in the Holy Church

To put together the three concepts defined in the previous chapter, we now have to ask how Christians believe that the church is holy and how we can say, at the same time, that the church is sinful. Further, if the church is both holy and sinful, how do we understand that seeming paradox? In his lecture *Who Are the Church?*, Joseph Komonchak writes, "If there is a single question that has haunted me for the forty years that I have now been teaching ecclesiology, it concerns the relationship between the glorious things that are said in the Bible and in the tradition about the Church—'*Gloriosa dicta sunt de te, civitas Dei!*' (Ps 86:3)—and the concrete community of limited and sinful men and women who gather as the Church at any time or place all around the world."[1] Now that we have talked about definitions of holiness, sin, and church, we can begin to try to relate these concepts to each other, always cognizant that we are bumping up against the limits of human knowledge in the face of the over-meaningful mystery of God and the dark, meaningless mystery of evil and sin.

My attempt to provide some clarity on Komonchak's question will proceed in two parts. In this chapter, I look at ecclesial holiness, drawing on Scripture and the tradition of the church, and on theologians who have thought through these questions before. In the following chapter, I do the same for ecclesial sin, looking at the ways in which we can understand the church as sinful. After this review, we are left with the paradox that the church we believe to be holy is also the church that is affected by human weakness and sin. The final two chapters, then, review some of the ways theologians, particularly

1. Joseph Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), 10–11.

beginning in the early twentieth-century, have attempted to square this circle, or at least illuminate further how to make sense of this seeming contradiction, and suggest some guidelines for future attempts to do so. In addition to the classic sources of theology, including Scripture, tradition, and the work of theologians, throughout these chapters I hope to return regularly to the "*prima theologia*" of the first chapter as a criterion and test of the "secondary theology" of ecclesial holiness and sinfulness pursued here. For both the theologies of ecclesial holiness and sinfulness in this chapter, and the attempts to reconcile the coexistence of these two aspects of the church in the next, the way the liturgy expresses ecclesial holiness and sinfulness will focus as a rule or yardstick—a canon, in the original Greek sense—of these attempts to express the reality of the church.

As noted earlier, belief in the church's sanctity is one of the earliest things Christians believed about the church. They were convinced that their regularly assembly as a community, often around the table on the first day of the week, as well as the wider network of comparable assemblies across Palestine and soon after the entire Mediterranean basin, could be spoken of as holy assemblies and their members as *hagioi*—as "the holy ones" or "the saints." That faith, embedded in the West in the creedal statement "*Credo . . .sanctam Ecclesiam Catholicam,*" that is, "I believe that the Catholic Church is holy" in the translation of Paul O'Callaghan,[2] remains a crucial foundation of Christian ecclesiology. Beyond the formula, why is the proclamation of the holiness of the church "good news"? Why is it important for Christian belief today, especially given the challenge to that belief caused by ecclesial failures? Believing the church to be holy, as all our early creeds confess, is the beginning of an investigation rather than the answer to a question—not just *is* the church holy, but *how* is the church, the congregation of the faithful, holy? How does this complex social reality, with its individuals across history as well as its institutions, values, meanings, and culture, participate in the transcendence and closeness of God?

2. Paul O'Callaghan, "The Holiness of the Church in Early Christian Creeds," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 54 (1988): 60–61.

The Holiness of God's Calling of the Church

The idea that God's holiness does not remain only in God but calls and sanctifies people, and calls and sanctifies them *as* a people, is rooted deeply in the Hebrew Scriptures and the life and practice of the Jewish people. Literally scores of passages repeat the refrain we find in Leviticus 19:2: "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." The holiness of Israel was both a blessing and a vocation, a gift and a task: Gordon Thomas writes that the holiness of Israel is meant to mirror God's holiness to the nations, so that the people as a whole functions as a kind of priest, a kind of mediator, between the rest of humanity and God: "Corporately, collectively, communally, in their shared living, Israel is called to model the life of the Godhead, to live out the love and goodness and justice of God for the nations to see and be drawn to."[3] Through the keeping of the commandments of Torah, the Jewish people participated in God's holiness; these included specifically "religious" observances, indicating how to pray and worship God properly, as well as "ethical" observances that regulated personal morality and wider issues of collective morality and social justice. The distinction is a somewhat artificial one, however—what was important was that in living out the covenant in their worship and in all their actions, God's holy people would be in right relation to God and to each other, and would serve as a "light to the nations."

The continuing history of the Jewish people, especially in times of crisis, exile, and destruction, prompted reflection upon how Israel failed to live up to this vocation and by doing so has frustrated God's plans for "all nations to be blessed in them" (cf. Gen 12:3). The prophets highlighted "the various ways in which Israel's holiness has been compromised," through idolatry, iniquity, and injustice.[4] These prophetic writings attempt both to make sense of the national tragedies of domination and exile by explaining them as the result of the people's failures and to provide the hope of a new future, the

3. Gordon Thomas, "A Holy God among a Holy People in a Holy Place," in *The Reader Must Understand: Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, ed. K.E. Brower and M.W. Elliott (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 60.

4. Thomas, 61.

hope of a renewed covenant in which Israel's holiness will be almost connatural: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). Similarly, in Ezekiel 36:23-28, we find a similar image, combined with a more explicit sense of holiness requiring cleansing and a new sense of Israel's vocation to the rest of humanity:

> I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Thomas, commenting on both of these passages, writes that "it is hard to imagine a more complete description of sanctification, comprised of cleansing, filling and communion."[5]

This eschatological hope of a new or renewed covenant, and the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity being made manifest in a truly holy people, was a major part of the context in which Jesus preached and in which early Christians understood themselves and the salvific significance of their community. In his canticle in the beginning of Luke, Zechariah proclaims "that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him [God] without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (Luke 1:74-75). Jesus' proclamation that the reign of God is at hand was in part a proclamation that God was truly bringing the people of Israel back from exile and making them holy. But, in addition to its continuity with pre-Christian Jewish expectations, the experience of God in Jesus "dislocates and relocates" holiness, however, to use the phrase of Stephen Barton

5. Thomas, 62.

once more.[6] As he writes, "In early Christianity, the claim is made that God is to be found somewhere new, though not in an unanticipated place. God is present in the person of the Son of God, himself the One in whom dwells the Holy Spirit of God."[7]

Two aspects of this "relocation" are key. First, the experience of God in Christ, and particularly in Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, means that holiness is now *Christoform* and *cruciform*. It is Christoform in that holiness is no longer located primarily for the early Jesus movement in the temple or even in Torah, but in the person of Jesus Christ. If holiness involves a dialectic between God's transcendent otherness and God's providential closeness, a Christian idea of holiness will always start from the way in which God has come close to humanity in the incarnation. Furthermore, holiness is cruciform—God's coming close to humanity was not in the manner of a triumphal visit or an overwhelming theophany, but in the kenotic self-denial of the Crucified One. God's holiness is found in a life of self-sacrificing love, and so human participation in holiness will bear the same shape.

The second aspect of this relocation of holiness draws upon the eschatological image of the Holy Spirit; in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter begins the early church's active mission by quoting Joel, " 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh' " (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28). Holiness is now made possible by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the gathered Christian community, the church. The church, thanks to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit—and only thanks to that presence—can now be called "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9). It makes sense, therefore, that the early creeds speak of the church in the context of the Holy Spirit, since belief in the holiness of the church (and in its apostolicity, its catholicity, and its unity) is an act of faith in the Holy Spirit. Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, Christians make the radical claim that God's presence is no longer only in the temple in Jerusalem, nor even only in the person

6. Stephen C. Barton, "Dislocating and Relocating Holiness: A New Testament Study," in *Holiness Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 193–213.

7. Barton, 197.

of Jesus Christ, but in a certain sense God's holiness can be encountered in and through the church, through the assembly of believers. The dislocation and relocation of holiness in the life of Jesus Christ and the Spirit-led growth of the early church extends that call to Gentiles, creating a new, mixed body of those in whom God's spirit dwells and whom God is calling, similarly, as a sign and instrument of the new world begun in Christ and to be completed in Christ at the end of time. Over and again the New Testament talks about the chosenness of this people; the words of 1 Peter, for instance, proclaim that the assembly, formerly "not a people," is now, thanks to God's calling, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." The Christian assembly, "summoned here before [God]" in the words of Eucharistic Prayer III of the Latin Catholic rite, has been assembled, through no merit of their own, to participate in God's economy of salvation, and that fact alone, the enduring and empowering call of God, is and remains the foundation of the church's holiness.

This is what makes belief in the holiness of the church "good news": the promise of the presence of God in a Christ-shaped, Spirit-guided community's self-sacrificing love. Rather than holiness as a matter of individual moral perfection or of smug self-satisfaction, this relocation of holiness allows the church to continue and in some ways extend God's saving and transforming plan for humanity. In these terms, this chosen and gathered assembly is a primary location where God is undoing the ill effects of sin and transforming and elevating human sociality beyond our expectations to create a people that truly reflects God's dreams for us.

The Objective Holiness of the Church

A second aspect of the church's holiness, emphasized especially as an aspect of the christological and apostolic origins of the church, are what have been called the "formal elements" or the "objective holiness" of the church—that is, the institutions, structures, and gifts of God in Christ and the Spirit. These are primarily such community-constituting, divinely instituted realities as the word of God found in Scripture, the rule of faith found in the creeds, the sacraments, and the teaching and governing ministries of the church—the "gifts which Christ has bestowed on his church to make it an effective instrument of grace and

salvation."[8] They are the gifts that allow the church to be the church, to be a sacrament of salvation. Calling these realities "divinely instituted" need not entail a kind of naive attribution of each and every detail of the church's continuing structure to the explicit words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. While the Eucharist, for instance, is deeply rooted in Jesus' transgressive meal practices and the particular ritualization of blessing he enacted at the Last Supper, we need not imagine him explicitly establishing a threefold structure of ordained ministry in order to judge that structure to be divinely instituted, just as we can see the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the establishment of the canon of Scripture.[9]

An idea of the church's "objective holiness" maintains the holiness of institutions like the canon of Scripture and the sacraments, regardless of the personal holiness of those teaching the faith or celebrating the sacraments. As Sullivan writes, "Such things as the word of God on which Christian faith is based, the sacraments, the gifts that equip people for ministry, are holy in themselves because they are Christ's gifts, and derive their holiness from him. They are objectively holy, because their holiness does not depend on the subjective holiness of the person who preaches the word of administers the sacraments."[10] This idea, going back to the Donatist controversies in North Africa in the fourth and fifth century, was not intended to enable a particularly lax or unholy clergy, but rather to protect people from any uncertainty that, due to the personal flaws or sin of their pastor, their ministry and sacraments might not "count." As Sullivan cautions, "It is not enough that [the church's] formal elements are holy; it must be a holy people, made up of holy men, women, and children."[11] But the structures and institutions of the church, particularly the Scriptures and the patterns of worship and ethics that go back to the apostolic preaching of who Christ is, have a certain "formal holiness." Belief that the sacraments are efficacious "ex opere operato" is less a statement of pessimism regarding the members of the church than a

8. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 70.

9. This is the argument made by Francis A. Sullivan in *From Apostles to Bishops* (New York: Paulist, 2001).

10. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 70.

11. Sullivan, 70.

statement of faith in the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit to maintain the church in its holiness regardless of the flaws, sometimes serious, of its leaders and members.

The Holiness of the Fulfillment of the Church

A third aspect of ecclesial holiness, parallel to its divine origins, is the church's divine destiny—that is, its participation in God's plan for humanity and for creation. As Karl Rahner writes, the church is in the first place "an eschatological reality; that is to say, the future fulfillment, notwithstanding its being still to come, is in her already a present event, so that she makes her pilgrimage in a certain sense in her end to her end."[12] As such an eschatological reality, the church is on pilgrimage toward the fulfillment of God's plan in the reign of God or, better, is being pulled forward through history by the power of the Holy Spirit leading it on toward its destiny. Unlike in the case of any individual person whose final salvation remains open to their freedom until their death, the church's role in the economy of salvation chosen by God, the promise that "the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18), means that while the church may stumble or wander in its pilgrimage, its final destiny, and that of God's recapitulation of all of creation, is not in doubt. To use the scholastic language favored by Yves Congar, the church as the *sacramentum* of the reign of God always already participates in the *res* of its fulfillment. One can go even further with Congar in speculation about how God views the church from the perspective of eternity, seeing it now without sin or fault, as the fulfilled and holy community that it will be thanks to God's grace.[13]

From within this perspective of its origins in God's choice, then, we can talk about the "indefectibility" of the church. In *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II taught that "the church . . . is held, as a matter of faith, to be unfailingly holy" (39). The Latin translated as "unfailingly holy" is "*indefectibiliter sancta*," which could also be translated as

12. Rahner, "The Church and the Parousia of Christ," in *Theological Investigations VI*, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (New York: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1969), 298.

13. Yves Congar, *Sainte Église: Études et approches ecclésiologique* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963), 145.

"holy in a way which can never fail" or "without the possibility of being lost." As Francis Sullivan comments regarding the translation of the term, "*indefectibiliter*" does not mean "without defect," as too rough a translation of "indefectibility" might suggest; rather, "indefectible holiness, then, is not such as to exclude all defect or imperfection, but it does exclude the loss of holiness, any ceasing to be truly holy."[14] Faith in the indefectible holiness of the church is an act of faith in the continued guiding presence in the church of the Holy Spirit, and an act of hope that God will protect the church from anything that would ultimately thwart God's work in humanity and the church that participates in that mission. Such hope, in Richard Lennan's terms, is "the conviction that nothing can overcome what God has made possible in Christ."[15] But such confidence that God will not allow the church to radically and irrevocably fail in its mission does not mean that it will not fail at all.

From this perspective, it's important to distinguish "indefectibility" from another important ecclesiological term related to church structures, "infallibility," particularly since the latter is misused so often both within and without the church. Like the idea of "indefectibility," ecclesial or papal "infallibility" is dependent upon, and an expression of, God's faithfulness in protecting the church from error. But the infallibility attributed to certain decisions of the church, and the manner in which papal teaching can participate in the charism of infallibility, are sharply limited to very particular exercises of teaching authority.[16] First, most properly, infallibility is attributed to the teacher (in the case of the pope), the teachers (in the case of the universal bishops), or to the church as a whole *only* in the particular act

14. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 75. See also Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members Affect the Holiness of the Church?" in *In God's Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism in Honour of Michael A. Fahey, S.J*, eds. Jaroslav Z. Skira and Michael S. Attridge (Leuven: University Press, 2006), 250.

15. Richard Lennan, "The Church: Got Hope?" in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist, 2013), 47.

16. For overall treatments of ecclesial teaching authority, see Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist 1983); and Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

of teaching or judging something to be true because divinely revealed. As defined in *Pastor Aeternus* at the First Vatican Council and reaffirmed in *Lumen Gentium* at the Second Vatican Council, infallibility is not a blank check by which all papal or magisterial judgments are correct, but rather a very particular charism by which the church's definition of the faith of the church in those matters necessary for salvation is aided by the Holy Spirit so as not to fall into dangerous error. As Pope Benedict XVI once said, "The pope is not an oracle, he is infallible on the rarest of occasions."[17]

Furthermore, there is the phenomenon of "creeping infallibility," a phrase first used by Yves Congar that refers to the extension of a penumbra of teaching infallibility beyond the limits identified by Vatican I, such that all papal statements, or all episcopal magisterial teaching, are infallible, irreformable, and to be believed as revealed truths. Such an idea can be found both among Catholics, out of an excess of devotion to the pope or as a mark of identity, and among others who, ignorantly or occasionally maliciously, assume papal infallibility extends far beyond these limits. This tendency is compounded by such factors as the growth of the "superstar" papacy from the nineteenth century until today and the leveling effect of the Catechism in which doctrines taught at various levels of ecclesial authority are presented without requisite distinction. Most problematically, this leads to an overall idea that infallibility relates not just to particular teaching acts regarding divine revelation but to *all* ecclesial acts, which is proved false not just by the history of ecclesial failures but by the church's own, carefully qualified doctrines of ecclesial indefectibility and teaching infallibility. Despite some popular usage, the dogmas of papal and ecclesial teaching infallibility do not entail a wider papal or ecclesial "infallibility," that is, a kind of overall "sinlessness"; rather, the charism of teaching infallibility given to the church is one of the many means by which God assists the indefectibly holy yet profoundly imperfect church along its pilgrim way.

In short, with regard to the holiness of the church's future, indefectibility does not mean that the church will reach its fullness without

17. "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Meeting with Diocesan Clergy of Aosta," 25 July 2005, at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050725_diocesi-aosta.html.

struggle, nor that it will walk its pilgrimage on a level, straight path, always onward and upward. But it does mean that God is faithful in God's promises to bring to fulfillment the work started in Christ and that the church is empowered not only by the events of God's coming close to us in Jesus Christ in first-century Palestine, but also by the final coming of Christ toward which the world is being drawn as by a magnet. Relationship with the Holy One who is both Alpha and Omega means that the church's holiness derives not only from the experiences and institutions of the past but also from the promises of its future, when we will be, as Eucharistic Prayer I for Reconciliation proclaims, "saints among the saints" before God.

From this we can see that the church, and its holiness, is not simply functional—not a vehicle to get us into heaven, or even simply a particular structure that would help individuals to become holy as individuals. Rather, the church is, as *Lumen Gentium* puts it, "the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery" (3). As "the seed and the beginning of that kingdom" (5), the church is a foretaste of the reign of God in which we participate as much as we are able in the holiness of the Holy One. And, as discussed with regard to any human participation in God's holiness, that holiness is entirely given and not earned, entirely dependent upon God's saving action on our behalf rather than upon any of our own merits or initiative. Even given the possibility of human openness to God's grace, part of the good news of the holiness of the church is that God has chosen us to be holy without our earning God's love or deserving that holiness through some effort of our own.

Taken together, these first three aspects of ecclesial holiness form the foundation for thought about the indefectibility of the church's holiness, rooted in belief in the power and persistence of God's plan and promises. God has called this "holy people" into existence through the mission of the Son and the Spirit, has bestowed on it the gifts it needs to be holy and in so doing to continue that mission, and has promised to maintain the church in holiness until the end of the ages. The starting point for thinking about ecclesial holiness, then, is faith in God's faithfulness to the church; these three aspects are some of the ways we can express our belief that God will not abandon the people that God has chosen and will give that people the graces they

need not only to receive salvation, but to participate in God's saving work of making the world holy, of "hallowing" all of creation, and in so doing of "hallowing" God's name.

But on their own, attention to this "formal" holiness of the church can be a bit, well, formal. As important as they are, pointing to the structures of the church that foster, even guarantee, the assembly's participation in God's holiness is, by itself, only a partial answer. Discussing the church's holiness requires more; namely, it requires attention to the ways in which the participation in the life of God made possible by these formal elements actually takes place in history. It requires attention to the actual lived holiness of the members of the church, both as individual persons and local churches, and as the people of God as a whole spread throughout history. Sometimes referred to as the "subjective holiness" of the church in ways that made it seem subordinate to the objective structures of ecclesial institutions, the reality of holy lives and holy communities should be lifted up as a primary story of how God really is sanctifying the church and, through the church, the world.

Individual Narratives of Holiness

We should remember once again, in thinking about the participation of individuals and communities in the holiness of God, that holiness is a broader category than morality; while we can expect good works to come spontaneously from a life of holiness as good fruit from a healthy tree, we should not reduce the term "saint" to its everyday synonym of "a really nice person" or "a really good person." The starting point for an individual's sanctity is their relationship with God, their growth in communion and perfection in love of God and neighbor, which leads organically to that love's enactment in particular, concrete acts. So while the so-called heroic virtue of the canonized saints as well as the less public, more hidden lives of virtue lived out in quiet, day-to-day holiness will always include acts of self-denying love in imitation of Christ, the roots of that love in relationship with God should not be neglected.

Beginning with individuals, we can begin to talk about the saints of the church, both in the primary biblical sense of the "holy ones"

to whom Paul, among others, writes in his churches, and in the more limited sense of the canonized saints.[18] In his crucial essay on "The Church of the Saints," Karl Rahner points to the veneration of the saints as more than a request for intercession or a way of remembering certain inspiring individuals from the church's past, and instead sees in the saints the church's proclamation that God actually, and not just theoretically, calls and empowers women and men to be holy as God is holy. Rahner writes, "She [the Church] must praise the grace which has had powerful effects, which has conquered, which has become real and manifest to us. Hence she must say: God really *has* redeemed, he really *has* poured out his Spirit, he really *has* done mighty things for sinners, he *has* let his light shine in the darkness."[19] The hope-inspiring memories of the very particular, concrete biographies of the holy ones the church canonizes for veneration and imitation point to the truth of God's promises—and it is no coincidence that the primordial saints venerated by the church were the martyrs, whose deaths were an imitation both of Christ's holy living and of the suffering that points to the desperate need for the coming reign of God. Again, "one truly holy person is worth more than any number of books about holiness."[20] Holy women and men "glorify the Lord by their lives," in the words of dismissal, and in doing so provide unique, concrete proof of holiness not only in a promised future but also as partially realized here and now in history.

But as important as it is to have the saints whose names grace our parishes and whom we remember in story and devotion, focusing upon only those canonized saints, or even primarily using the term "saint" to refer to them, impoverishes our ecclesiological vision. Rahner suggested that these canonized saints were crucial not only in proving the holiness of the church, but in providing models for each new time, place, and culture of the multitude of paths to holiness. But he also rooted his thought on the saints in the wider concept

18. I am here following the convention of the translator of Karl Rahner's "The Church of the Saints," *Theological Investigations* III (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 91–104, who capitalizes "Saint" to refer to a canonized individual and leaves "saint" uncapitalized to point to the broader, and in the end more foundational, category of individual holy women and men.

19. Rahner, 94.

20. Donald Nicholl, *Holiness* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 5.

that he called the "biblical" idea of the saints, in which holiness was much more widespread, ordinary, and hidden—and no less holy due to that. "Those whom we in present-day usage call Saints have in fact no special advantage in this respect over all those 'saints' in the biblical sense, i.e. in regard to formation of the holy Church as the historical witness of the holy and sanctifying God and his grace which has already and finally begun its reign."[21] He even suggested that, despite the importance of canonized saints as public figures, one might find even greater holiness in lives of the unknown saints of history: "The greatest part of holiness must take place in silence, in being taken for granted and in forgetting about self, so that even the right hand of the Church does not know what the left hand is doing. Yet, since the Church must nevertheless *know* that she remains in all ages the holy one who thereby praises the grace of God, she must also know explicitly about some saints, which means quite possibly (who can say?) that she does not know anything at all about many of her greatest glories."[22]

The theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson further explores the ecclesiological significance of this fact, combining attention to the unknown saints of history with feminist-liberationist attention to the structures that have made many saints more silent than they ought to have been. Like Rahner, Johnson sees the holiness of the saints as an enduring proof of the truth of the Gospel and of human participation in history in the holiness of God: "But if holy people keep appearing, ordinary people in ordinary time, they give living witness that the Spirit has not abandoned the church and thus grace continues more powerful than evil in every age."[23] But at the same time, Johnson upends our usual theological expectations in an attempt to recover the ordinary saints of Christianity as the foundational reference of the term. She writes, "Many a theologian begins discussion of [the communion of saints] by acknowledging that even though the New Testament refers to the whole Christian community as saints, this will be set aside in order to consider paradigmatic figures, who then become in practice if not in theory the real saints. But this strategy woefully shortchanges

21. Rahner, "The Church of the Saints," 97–98.
22. Rahner, "The Church of the Saints," 103.
23. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 228.

the breadth and depth of Wisdom's strategy which is to lead all peoples on the path to life."[24] The phenomenon of holy women and men, "ordinary people in ordinary time," upon whom the Spirit has been outpoured and who consecrate daily life in small, hidden, yet faithful ways, is for her a primary sign of the holiness of the church. Recovering the doctrine of the communion of saints as a testimony to the many "friends of God and prophets," including but not limited to the paradigmatic figures canonized by the church, is a way of recovering these saints in the memory of the church and strengthening our hope in the universal call to holiness. She sees in the dogma of the communion of saints an opportunity to lift up the saints overlooked due to the biases and presuppositions of our past. This could include holy women, especially, but also lay and married people, members of marginalized ethnic, racial, or economic communities, LGBT people—all those whose holiness was hidden in their time and place from the gaze of the church. In the words of many Latina and mujerista theologians, such attention to the holiness of "ordinary people in ordinary time" also points us toward greater attention to the sanctity of *lo cotidiano*, the day-to-day reality of life, as a primary locus for ecclesiology.[25]

This idea was clearly taught at Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium*'s emphasis in chapter 5 on the *universal* call to holiness of all Christians in view of their baptism, a teaching reproposed most recently by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*. This was one of the more remarkable and in the long run influential results to have come from the council.[26] In the same paragraph in which the church's indefectible holiness is taught, the document states, "Therefore, all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness"; it further states that "it is therefore quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of christian life and to the perfection of charity" (39, 40). This is a remarkable contrast to some pre-Vatican II understandings of personal

24. Johnson, 220.

25. See Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018); and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano*: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10 (2002): 5–17.

26. See Brian P. Flanagan, "The Universal Call to Holiness and Laity in the Church," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32 (2016): 219–32.

holiness, in which, as Aurelie Hagstrom has written, Catholic theologians maintained two different tracks for Christians in their relation to God: clergy and women and men religious were called to holiness; laypeople, by contrast, were called to a lower bar, that of "avoiding sin."[27] Indeed, the first drafts of the chapter on the universal call to holiness at Vatican II were specifically for a document on those in religious life following the apostolic counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and it was only in the later development of the document that the broader sense of the call to holiness was retrieved.[28] This makes the holiness of the church good news for all, not just for some, and helps to distinguish the formal holiness of the structures of ordination and sacramental ministry from the wider, and one might suggest deeper, call to holiness received in baptism by all Christians and to be lived out in a variety of contexts, ministries, and vocations.

At the same time, however, the recovery of the universal call to holiness has unexpected consequences; it intensifies, rather than eases, the difficulties in addressing the continuing presence of sin within the church, in that the task of holiness can no longer be given solely to clergy and religious, or outsourced to a group of spiritual "professionals." Addressing the holiness of the church, and its sinfulness, will require not just looking at the holiness and failures in holiness of church leaders, but at the far more complex holiness and failures in holiness of the people as a whole, pastors and parishioners, bishops and the baptized. If there is no longer a two-track system of ecclesial holiness, there is also no longer a two-track explanation of ecclesial sinfulness, in which the holiness of church leaders or those in religious life can be seen to simplistically counterbalance or offset the failures of the lay faithful of the church as a whole.

Collective Narratives of Holiness

If this is the case—if "holy people keep appearing"—what kind of communities do they form? While holiness has often been attributed to "the church," in the sense of the universal community of the faithful, and to individual saints, canonized and otherwise, in the church,

27. Cf. Aurelie Hagstrom, *The Emerging Laity* (New York: Paulist, 2010), 44.
28. Flanagan, "The Universal Call to Holiness," 221–23.

there may be room for greater attention to the phenomenon of holy communities at more intermediate levels. As I noted above, if "the church" is best understood along the lines of Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard's "church of churches," then we should expect to find holiness not only at the widest levels of the universal community, but also at various smaller forms of church such as the diocese, the parish, the base community, or the particular monastery or religious community. If, as I will suggest below, we need to give more attention to the ways in which the church in its collective actions can fail or sin, we cannot do so without also giving attention to the ways in which the church can concretely, historically, and collectively be holy. But if the church is not simply a worldwide, eternal conglomerate, but instead always a communion of local churches deeply rooted in their particular places and times, then we can expect that there will be differences in how these local churches are holy. With regard to individuals, there is no such thing as an abstract "saint," but rather saints with particular biographies, contexts, and possibilities of holiness that are unique. Similarly, holy churches, rather than being identical, will each be unique performances of the story of Christian holiness, unique possibilities of what a holy society can be in any particular time and place.

In the tradition of the church, we might point toward room for further development in remembering and telling these stories by unearthing and recovering some overlooked traditions of collective holiness. One example might be the large groups of martyrs venerated collectively in the history of the early church. These stories are often of soldiers in the late Roman Empire who convert en masse to Christianity and are collectively martyred, such as the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste honored especially in the Eastern churches, the third-century Theban Legion, or the even more spectacular 20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia. Such ideas of collective martyrdom continued in examples like St. Ursula and the 11,000 virgins or, in more recent times and with more historical verifiability, those honored as the Ugandan Martyrs, the Martyrs of Japan, and the so-called New Martyrs killed for their faith by ideological or totalitarian regimes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[29] Other examples can be found in more

29. Pope Francis lifts up some of these examples as well in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 141.

ordinary, less dramatic circumstances or in ordinary places made extraordinary by the times in which they found themselves, whether lay or religious, large or small. One could lift up the example of the village of Le Chambon-sur-Ligne in France, led by its pastor André Trocmé and his wife Magda, to work together to save the lives of some 3,500 Jews from the Shoah, or of the abolitionist churches of the nineteenth century that worked together to end the enslavement of Africans and African Americans. As with the honoring of individuals, we ought to be careful to not so elevate the example of these extraordinary witnesses such that we forget the much wider, deeper, and no less real holiness of many other Christian communities living lives of holiness in the everyday; but at the same time, developing some language and ways of venerating not only "The Church" but *particular* churches as instruments of holiness and foretastes of the kingdom is necessary if we are also going to explore how such communities and churches sometimes stumble and fail in their witness to Christ. The "great cloud of witnesses" cheering us on in our race need not be thought of as a collection of atomized individuals, but instead as they were on earth, a communion of communions joined by shared cultures and history as well as by shared faith and love.

The holiness of the church is an essential part of our confession of God's saving action in Christ and the reality of God's grace, active in history and waiting ahead of us in the fulfillment toward which the world is being drawn. Belief in the church's holiness is fundamentally a confession not of the independent goodness of the church, but of the grace of God and in particular of the saving work of Christ and the empowering, enduring presence of the Holy Spirit. The "formal elements" or "objective holiness" that we attribute to the church's origins, to the gifts God has given it for its mission, and to its final destiny delineate the possibility, even the probability, of that holiness; God's calling of a holy people, Christ's promise to be with the church "until the end of the age" and to send the Holy Spirit to empower the church to do greater things than he (cf. John 14:12) all point to the sanctification of a holy people as part of God's economy of salvation. At the same time, that sanctification is not only a future reality. Despite the failures that we will discuss in the next section, there is an important theological reason that the title of this book is *Stumbling* In *Holiness*, and not *Stumbling* Toward *Holiness*. The church exists

in the eschatological tension of "already" and "not yet," in which the *res*, the reign of God, is not entirely other, but is already real and present, though in a limited way, in the *sacramentum* of the life of the church. The "great cloud of witnesses," both famous and unknown, both individually and as communities of love, remains one of the great signs of that inbreaking reign of God. Their concrete biographies and the ways they lived out love of God and neighbor not only provide the church with examples and intercessors; they also attest to the possibility that the church *can be* the holy people God is calling it to be.

Ecclesial Holiness in the Liturgy

Let me conclude by asking whether this outline of ecclesial holiness can be supported by the *prima theologia* of the church's liturgical practice—is this understanding of the church's holiness what the church expresses about itself in its prayer? Two aspects of our liturgical practice seem to conform to the vision I've outlined here. First, one aspect of the church's liturgy is the regular honoring of where the presence of Christ can be found in the assembly. As I noted in the first chapter, when my parish gathers for Eucharist, we use incense to venerate Christ's presence in the altar, the Book of the Gospels, the eucharistic elements, the presider, and the assembled congregation. Notably, these locations of Christ's presence can also be identified with the major divinely instituted structures of the church that allow it to participate in the missions of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and thereby to participate in the holiness of the triune God: the gift of the church as a whole (altar), the gift of the word of God (Gospel book), the gift of the sacraments (bread and wine), the gift of Christlike ministry (presider), and the gift of God's election of a faith-filled community (assembly). Each time the assembly of the baptized gathers, we are once again offered the "formal elements" of ecclesial holiness in order to then be sent into the world in mission to glorify the Lord by our lives.

Second, in the eucharistic assembly, we also can experience the reality of holy lives being lived through the grace of God in various ways. At a more structural level, the sanctoral calendar makes present the memories of the saints throughout the year, telling the concrete

stories of holy women and men remembered across the centuries. Similarly, in the eucharistic prayer we name some of these saints and invoke the memory of the whole "cloud of witnesses" with whom we join here and now in praise of God through Christ and in the Spirit. Elizabeth Johnson further suggests ways in which our celebrations of the feast of All Saints and traditional practices like lament and litany can be further developed so as to invoke the memory of *all* the friends of God and prophets, and not only the "paradigmatic" saints canonized by the church.[30] Particularly if we expand our expectations of holiness to include attention to the ordinary holiness of women and men living out their love of God and neighbor in small ways, in silence, in relative obscurity, many of us can point to the concrete lives of the baptized encountered in our assemblies whose holiness has made God's holiness real in every time and place. Similarly, in the whole community's participation in mission, the church that is sent out to the world helps to make God's holiness present in our cities and neighborhoods, our schools and workplaces; when the church goes out into the world, "sharing their grief and pain, their joy and hope" in the words of the *Gaudium et Spes*-inspired eucharistic prayer "Jesus, the Way to the Father," the church becomes a sacrament of holiness in its work for peace, justice, and the coming reign of God. In short, becoming and being "saints among the saints" need not be only a future goal; if the *congregatio fidelium* can also be described as the *communio sanctorum*, then each time we gather to receive Christ in word and sacrament, we "become what we receive," God's holy people.

30. See Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 244–62.

CHAPTER 4

Have Mercy on Us, Lord, for We Have Sinned

Why Discuss Ecclesial Sin?

Given this importance of the good news of the church's holiness, it seems at first contradictory to bring up the question of sin within the church, either the sin of individual members of the church or the possibility of ecclesial sin proper—that is, of sinfulness attributed to the community as a whole. Why should a faithful Catholic theologian even bring it up? There is, first, a theological argument that adverting to the presence of sin in the church or to sin committed by the church in some sense would undermine faith in the church. The threat of "scandal" hangs over the discussion of ecclesial sin, both in the technical theological sense of causing an occasion for another to sin (in this case, by lack of faith in the church) and in the broader, common sense of embarrassing and undermining the church.[1] Even if the experience of the sexual abuse crisis has shown many Catholics that an oversensitivity to the danger of scandal can, tragically and ironically, lead to both greater scandal and greater mistakes on the part of the church, any discussion of ecclesial sin needs to take this concern seriously. In a world in which religious belief and many kinds of authority are often attacked or ridiculed, one should introduce discussion of the mistakes of the church with a healthy sense of the danger of discussing ecclesial sin too flippantly or casually. The erosion of ecclesial authority over the past decades was partially caused by an inability to honestly discuss our own failings, but we do the future of the church no service by carelessly joining our critiques with those whose motives are not the further puri-

1. For more on the concept of scandal as it functions both theologically and sociologically, see Angela Senander, *Scandal: The Catholic Church in Public Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

fication and reformation of the flaws of the Christian community but its marginalization in our common political and economic life. Further, given the excesses of ecclesiological piety that have been shattered in recent years among many Catholics, particularly in relation to the sexual and physical abuse of minors, one should tread carefully, though always honestly, in treating the sinfulness of the church so as not to snuff out the last sparks of faith in the church among those scandalized by the gap between the ideal they were taught to believe in and the painful reality that they encountered or even suffered.

Historically, particularly in the past five centuries, frank discussions of sin in the church were few and far between, for a number of reasons. First, after the Reformation, the four "marks" of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic were viewed less often as statements of belief or hope in the Holy Spirit's power and more often as criteria by which the true church could be found. Attempts to identify sinfulness in the church were usually used polemically to highlight a lack of holiness and thereby to question the truth or legitimacy of the ecclesial community under attack. The last thing any particular church would want to do would be to highlight its own failings and, in so doing, to give rhetorical ammunition to another church. Furthermore, in the Roman Catholic Church, the ultramontanist response to modernity, the Catholic focus upon the primacy and the person of the pope, expressed itself in ways that often conflated the church, the pope, and the Holy Spirit.[2] As Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard suggested, when some twentieth-century catechetical materials referred to the pope not as the "vicar of Peter" or even the "vicar of Christ" but as the "successor of God," the Catholic Church moved to an understanding of the pope as "more-than-a-pope"[3] and of the church as having already reached its promised purity and sinlessness. In such a context, directly addressing the failures of the church would be perceived as a direct threat to a whole popular religious movement that saw the church as the one pure and sinless bulwark against the forces of modernity, rationalism, and error.

2. Joseph A. Komonchak, "Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 18 (1997) 353–85.

3. See Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, *L'évêque de Rome* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1982), 49.

Given such difficulties, why did theologians begin to address the question of ecclesial sin, and why should we continue to do so? To start from the historical record, it seems more than coincidental that the first sustained reflection among Roman Catholic theologians upon the reality of sin in and of the church came in the particular context of the early and mid-twentieth century.[4] Two world wars, the Shoah, and the advent of nuclear weapons all impelled theologians to look more seriously at not only the phenomena of individual sinful Christians, but at the ways in which ecclesial leaders and at times whole Christian communities seemed to participate in sinful activities. The particular European context of much postwar theology could not fail to reflect upon the deep challenge to notions of the holiness of the church posed by the passive and active participation of Christians in Italian fascism, German Nazism, French collaborationism, and above all the blasphemy against the holiness of God that was the organized, institutional murder of six million Jews in the Shoah. In addition, independence movements and conflict in former colonies of European countries also began to prompt reflection upon the mixed record of ecclesial cooperation with sometimes brutal colonial regimes in the Global South. And, finally, a growing sense of the historicity of the church that "travels the same journey as all of humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world," as *Gaudium et Spes* (40) would later describe it, allowed theologians to begin thinking through the theological consequences of mistaken decisions and actions in the history of the church. From within the new perspective of historical consciousness, theologians began looking at moments in church history like the Crusades or the Inquisition not simply as the tools of anti-Catholic or anti-religious polemicists, but as a point for theological inquiry into the phenomenon of collective mistakes on the part of the church and its leaders.

In addition to this particular context in which reflection upon ecclesial failure began, there are other good theological reasons for clearly and frankly addressing sin in the church, even at the risk of scandal or of complicating the faith of some believers. First, and most simply, because it may be true; we do the church no service by papering over

4. For an additional survey of these developments, see Giuseppe Alberigo, *Chiesa Santa e Peccatrice* (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 1997), 38–50.

its history. Not facing up honestly to ways in which the church needs to repent for its past or reform its present practice actively hinders it in its mission to give a foretaste of the coming reign of God. As in one's own individual spiritual life and moral formation, the "gift of tears" in which one recognizes how one has failed to live up to one's baptismal vocation and following of Christ is a crucial step in receiving the forgiveness of God and amending one's life; in the terms of Ignatian spirituality, in the church no less than in the individual no one proceeds to the Illumination of the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises without passing through the First Week of attention to one's own sin.

A second reason to explore the phenomenon of sin within the church forthrightly is that the mission of the church is actively hindered by hypocrisy or the perception of hypocrisy on the part of the Christian community. In an "Age of Authenticity,"[5] the greater scandal to many within and without the church is less the phenomenon of error than the denial or the hiding of error. In the case of clergy sexual abuse, for example, it was the cover-up and silence around the abuse of minors by clergy as much as any particular act of abuse that has led to the collapse of participation and ecclesial authority in many sectors of the church in North America. If the church is to speak to our context and culture today, it can do so by being humbly aware of its own limitations and shortcomings, rather than retreating into an increasingly fragile, even laughable, self-presentation of flawless purity.

Third, telling the truth of ecclesial failure is an act of fidelity to the dangerous narratives of those whom the church has failed. The idea of "dangerous memories" comes from the work of the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz.[6] Metz argues that the distinctive Christian practice of remembering the shocking, interrupting death of Christ leads to a community of memory that preserves, particularly through narrative, the Christlike suffering of those who have been

5. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009), 473–504.

6. For an overview, see Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007).

victims of the dominating violence of others. The memory of Christ's death, and the memories of all innocent victims, are "dangerous" in that they challenge current systems of dominance and oppression and, as narrative, cannot be "argued against," but only heard, mourned, and imitated. They function as engines of a forward-looking, eschatological vision that seeks not simply more of the same, or the progressive mitigation of harm, but a justice wide enough to include these biographies of pain. As Bruce Morrill writes in summary of Metz, "To remember explicitly the 'losers' of history is a negative awareness which demands that their suffering not be in vain but, rather, that it motivate efforts to build a future that is characterized by freedom and the vanquishing of such suffering."[7] Further, "the *memoria passionis, mortis, et resurrectionis Jesu Christi* both attests to God's solidarity with all victims of suffering and oppression, and assures the final, still unrealized, deliverance of the victims. Christians thereby read history not in affirmation of conquest but in hope for the conquered."[8]

Telling the truth about ecclesial error and about structural sinfulness is required out of fidelity to the memory of those who have been the victims of those errors. A starting point for repentance means taking seriously the pain of those, especially the relatively nameless or faceless ones, who have suffered because of the sinfulness of individual Christians, of individual leaders in the church, and of the church community as a whole. This can be true of memories from the more distant past, for which the church has begun to address and express repentance in many cases.[9] But this also needs to be the case for those dangerous memories that are—or should be—within living memory. The narrative approach recommended by Metz does a better job of making concrete the weight of ecclesial sin than vague references to, for example, "errors committed in the service of the truth."[10] Just as the church remembers the distinctive and liberating memories of holiness not only in more general doc-

7. Bruce Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 29–30.

8. Morrill, 36.

9. See Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance* (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

10. The phrase used in the year 2000 Vatican Day of Pardon service.

trinal language, but in the concrete stories of the lives of the saints, there is a need to provide an unfortunate yet accurate "a-hagiography" or "negative hagiography" of the church's failures. The church ought to do so not to provide further scandal to the faithful or further ammunition for its critics, but as the necessary starting point for self-critique and further growth into the fullness of the reign of God. Such an a-hagiography, such an intentional, detailed memory of the victims of our individual and collective sinfulness, will lead not to a "purification of the past"—to "purify" the church's past would require the sinful and truly scandalous *erasure* of the suffering done by us and on our behalf—but to further repentance and, in repentance, confession of the mercy of God and greater purification of our future.

This leads to the final reason for explicitly and frankly treating ecclesial sinfulness—that, as in the more general concept of sin, the concept of the sinfulness of the church is yet, at heart, part of the Gospel. That means, paradoxically, that the confession of ecclesial sin is a confession of *good news*. Now, this must be done carefully. As in any discussion of evil or sin in general, it would be wrong to suggest that the existence of evil or sin in the church is anything other than a counterwitness to the Gospel, and it would be blasphemous to suggest that the participation of the church in evil or sin is in any way caused or willed by God. Nevertheless, the fact that the church can be aware of its failings as *sin*, as *not* part of God's will for humanity, rather than as a necessary consequence of human sociality or human nature, is good news. The knowledge that the church's participation in evil and sin is "not the way it's supposed to be" is, in itself, good news.[11] All knowledge of past mistakes can lead to change, and that is part of the hope of acknowledging ecclesial failure. But knowledge of past mistakes as *sin* can lead not only to change, but to confession and repentance. Confession positions the failure as both wrong but also as forgivable in God's grace; repentance is an act of hope that the very act of knowing what was wrong can lead to conversion, to a change of practice and a change of heart. Therefore, the confession of ecclesial sin is, within this wider context, a confession

11. Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

of faith in the goodness of human sociality and in the work of God, which is freeing human social life from its sinful tendencies; rather than a despair which assumes that human communities and institutions are now and ever will be flawed, confessing ecclesial sin as sin opens the door to repentance *and* to the breaking in of the reign of God not only in individual lives but in the institutions of a human community. As Richard Lennan writes, "Paradoxically, then, the holiness of the church, no less than its hope, can shine most brightly when we acknowledge our failings and our need for the love of God that is always greater than those failings. Such an acknowledgement is the product of grace-formed humility and the equally grace-formed surrender to God in hope."[12]

For all of these reasons, ecclesiology, even as it wants to proclaim its faith in God's saving work in Christ and the church's holy participation in that work through the Holy Spirit, must do so with an honest confession of the church's past and present participation in human evil and sin. Historically, the past century of reflection upon the church has allowed Christian ecclesiology to move beyond post-Reformation intra-Christian polemics at the same time that the conspicuousness of ecclesial failures in this past century requires honesty if the church is to speak to the world in this age of authenticity. The church's mission—the very reason for its existence—is to proclaim the good news of the reign of God, and the potential scandal of admitting its imperfection is outweighed by the greater scandal of its message being ignored due to a perception of hypocrisy or inauthenticity. Further, we owe a debt of honesty to those who have been the victims of sin associated with the church; telling their stories with accuracy and lament is a practice that can help to lower the odds of repeating similar errors in the future. But, just as important, remembering the dangerous memories of the church's own history also stretches our expectations for the reign of God, which is not only the result of a progressive, onward-and-upward movement in history, but also must be wide enough to encompass the named and unnamed victims of past sin whose lives mirrored that of Christ. Telling truths

12. Richard Lennan, "The Church: Got Hope?" *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist, 2013), 51.

in church, as Mark Jordan names it,[13] is a practice that allows us to name sin as sin, even as the church repents for its past failures and stretches forward to its full conversion. Such a movement is only possible if we are able to name ecclesial sin as sin—that is, as "not the way it's supposed to be" and therefore as unnecessary and abnormal to our communal life in Christ.

Ecclesial Limitation

Before discussing sin proper within the Christian church, we need to widen our horizon just a bit to take notice of the broader context in which the church fails to be all that it will be. On the pilgrimage to its fulfillment in the reign of God, sins committed by members of the church, by its leaders, or by communities and churches in their collective action are obviously the most immediate seeming challenges to belief in the holiness of the church. But sometimes what seemingly hinders the church in its reception of God's gifts of grace is the simple fact of creaturely limitation. As Hans Küng wrote, "We cannot assume that everything in the Church which is imperfect, erroneous, or misguided should simply be regarded as sinful."[14] Errors of understanding, failures in communication, misinterpretations of a situation or mistakes in the responses to those situations: these things can, and have, occurred not necessarily because of the sinfulness of the church, but because of the humanity of the church, the clay vessels in which we receive the gifts of grace.

For example, complicated and still contested as it is,[15] the case of the ecclesial condemnation of Galileo in the seventeenth century provides an example of the interaction of the presence of sin within the wider context of simple human limitation. While some ecclesial actors seem to have sinned in the condemnation and punishment of Galileo, these actions took place within the broader context of simple human limitation: limitations of the natural science known at the

13. Mark Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Boston: Beacon, 2003).

14. Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 320.

15. For an overview of the entire Galileo affair, see Annibale Fantoli, *The Case of Galileo: A Closed Question?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

time, limitations in the biblical scholarship of theologians, limitations in the technologies then available to explore and test scientific hypotheses. In short, while there seem to have been culpable errors made by ecclesial officials on behalf of the church in the Galileo affair, any sins were committed within the context of nonsinful human limitations of life in an early modern European context. And while in this case we can see further development in human knowledge and understanding that has freed humans from some of the limitations of the seventeenth century, we should be wary of any complacency in the idea that change is always onwards-and-upwards progress; we should wonder what generalized, widespread human limitations exist in our times and places that our ancestors never had to wrestle with, or did so with greater prudence, skill, or knowledge.

Our understanding here begins to encounter the difficulties of the wider, deeper question of what we call the problem of evil in the world, particular the forms of absence that exist not due to direct human sin, but to the limitations of creatureliness lived out in time. Why has God ordained that creation history, human history, and even human salvation history will occur within a framework of limitations and openness to sin rather than quickly and efficiently bringing to completion God's plans for humanity? One could begin to point here to the value God seems to place on the emergent freedom and creativity of creation, and the opaque mystery of the fact that God values human, and even natural, freedom enough to allow the seemingly negative effects of change, limitation, and development.[16] To further explore this topic would take us too far afield, but it suffices to point out that the phenomena of sin within the church occur within an overall creation that allows for the possibility of limitation and of failure. The fact that the mission of the church in time occurs within that context need not contradict belief in ecclesial holiness, but should alert us to the fact that even the lives of the saints and of holy communities, even the holiness of the church, is not an otherworldly holiness that eradicates the forms that the Creator has established for creation; human participation in God's holiness, and God's holy

16. For the best treatment of these phenomena, see the work of John F. Haught, especially his recent book *The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

church, exist within the limitations of creation, rather than functioning as an escape from our current forms of existence, and so there remains the possibility, even the probability, of nonsinful ecclesial error. *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*.

Ecclesial Sin

Remembering our earlier working definition of sin as failure in love of God and neighbor, we need to distinguish at least three categories in which sin appears to be present within the continuing life of the Christian church. First, and most prominently, we can discuss the presence of individuals who sin as members of the church, both those who commit so-called venial sins in ways that weaken their relationship with God, and those who commit mortal sins, or sin proper. Second, there is a need to discuss the more specific case of sins committed by those who are leaders in the church, such as clergy, heads of religious communities, and theologians and other intellectuals; in these cases, it seems closer to speaking not only about sin *in* the church but about sin *of* the church, and therefore needs to be unpacked more carefully. Third, analogously to the way I discussed the holiness of local churches and communities or wider forms of the church that seem to possess a kind of agency even if distinct from the agency of individual actors, we need to also look at the possibility of sin at the level of collective ecclesial action and how either, in particular acts or in forms of "structural sin," the church as a community can be described as "sinful."

Sins of Members of the Church

First, with regard to the sins of particular individuals, there is a long, and sometimes contentious, history of Christian reflection upon members of the church who, despite their incorporation into the community through baptism and the presumed grace received through their reception of the word of God and the sacraments, nevertheless fail to live out that grace in love of God and neighbor. With the exception of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic teaching, *all* members of the church sin, at least in the form of "venial sins"—that is, sins that weaken without mortally wounding one's relationship with God in the church. In various points in church history, the idea

repeatedly arose that some members of the church had so advanced in their pursuit of holiness that they no longer sinned and that those sinless members were, in fact, the true church, as distinct from those still prone to sin. Further, some of these movements, like forms of Donatism, Pelagianism, and Novatianism, suggested that only ecclesial ministers who were themselves already in this state of perfection could validly celebrate the sacraments or lead the communities. In these theologies, justification by grace, or the continued pursuit of further sanctification after initial justification, led to a life of continued sinlessness among some members of the church or, in some forms, among all true members of the church.

Against these perfectionist tendencies that would divide the church between saints and sinners *before* the end of time, the churches responded by condemning the idea that any of the baptized were already, in this life, sinless. One of the arguments was scriptural, based upon the statement in 1 John 1:8 that "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." While a bit overreliant upon a single proof text (complicated by the statement in 1 John 3:9 that "those who have been born of God do not sin"), the argument does also draw upon other images of the church before the judgment, especially in the thought of Augustine, such as the field with both wheat and weeds (Matt 13:24-30) and the net that pulls in both good and bad fish (Matt 13:47-50).

The stronger argument, however, in line with the method I have been pursuing here, is liturgical—the ability, and need, of each Christian to pray the Our Father truly. Praying each day to God to "forgive us our trespasses," as with the other collective actions of penance that compose Christian liturgical prayer like the *Confiteor* and the wider Penitential Act of the Eucharist, is true prayer. Therefore, for instance, the Council of Carthage in 418 condemns as anathema those who say that when "the saints say in the Lord's prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses' (Matt 6:12), they say this not for themselves, because that petition is not now necessary for them, but for others who are sinners among their people."[17] "For who would tolerate one praying and lying, not to men, but to the Lord himself," the following canon continues, "who says with his lips that he wishes to be forgiven, and

17. Council of Carthage, Canon 7, DS 107.

in his heart holds that he does not have debts to be forgiven?'"[18] In the words of Bishop Stephen Laszlo, who spoke at the Second Vatican Council on the topic "Sin in the Holy Church of God," the Council of Carthage "says that the *saints* themselves in the Church must acknowledge that they are sinners and must always pray, in truth and not merely out of 'humility': 'forgive us our trespasses.'"[19]

What about the case of those members of the church who are not simply sinners in this "normal" sense, but whose sins are more serious, whose failures in love of God and neighbor are "deadly" to their relationship to God, whose sins are mortal in that they constitute the refusal of charity and sanctifying grace? Even here, the tradition of the church supports the idea that they are members of the church, though in a deeply deficient way. Karl Rahner helpfully intensifies the point by suggesting that believing that sinners are members of the church cannot simply be reduced to their sociological or institutional membership; to say that gravely sinful persons are still members of the church cannot be reduced to the easier challenge that such persons are simply still on the rolls of the local parish. He writes that a "sinner" in the church "signifies a person who is in reality devoid of God's grace, a person who is wandering far from God, a person whose destiny is perhaps moving with fearful consistency toward an ultimate eternal damnation. And *this* sinner belongs to *this* Church: he is not merely entered in her official register, a part of the visible presence of God's grace in the world, a member of the Body of Christ!"[20] Given the opacity of our own self-knowledge, this fact may be comforting (even I, the worst sinner, remain in the church with the possibility of salvation yet open to me) or, in Rahner's opinion, "terrifying": "One really has the name of being alive and yet is dead."[21]

The Second Vatican Council helpfully made more sense of the status of grave sinners within the church by means of its less binary

18. Council of Carthage, Canon 8, DS 108.

19. Stephen Laszlo, "Sin the Holy Church of God," in Hans Küng, Yves Congar, and Daniel O'Hanlon, *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 46.

20. Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," *Theological Investigations VI*, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (New York: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1969), 257.

21. Rahner, 257.

understanding of ecclesial membership. As opposed to a previous ecclesiology in which one either was or was not a member of the church, the theology of ecclesial membership outlined in *Lumen Gentium* was designed primarily to allow more positive discourse regarding the real yet incomplete communion between Catholic Christians and the members of other Christian traditions, the Jewish people, and women and men of goodwill from other religious traditions or no religious tradition. At the same time, this shift in the modeling of ecclesial membership also allowed the council to teach more clearly that "a person who does not persevere in charity, however, is not saved, even though incorporated into the church. Such people remain indeed in the bosom of the church, but only 'bodily' not 'in their hearts'" (*Lumen Gentium*, 14). As Francis A. Sullivan points out, this expression of "remaining in the bosom of the Church" goes back to Augustine and indicates how the council attempts to communicate the real yet deficient membership of gravely sinful people in the church.[22] Rahner compares such a situation to the difference between the "validity" and the "fruitfulness" of a sacrament; as a sacrament validly yet unworthily received is diminished by the refusal, conscious or not, of the grace of the sacrament by its recipient, so a grave sinner "has robbed his continuing membership in the Church of all the meaning and effect to which it is by its entire nature ordered: the inner, living union of men with God and with each other in the Holy Spirit."[23]

It can be easy here to get lost in the extreme case of these hypothetically grave sinners, in order perhaps to get ourselves off the hook. We should not underestimate the possibility that even through patterns or series of so-called minor sins, rather than one major violation, we may be, so to speak, "the walking dead"—disciples in name only whose lives are enacting a deep choice to refuse the grace of God, a choice expressed through small failures of love of God and neighbor. The reality, however, even if yet more dangerous, is far more prosaic: we continue to stumble through our lives in our imperfect pursuit

22. See Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members Affect the Holiness of the Church?" in *In God's Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism in Honour of Michael A. Fahey, S.J*, ed. Jaroslav Z. Skira and Michael S. Attridge (Leuven: University Press, 2006), 250.

23. Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 259. See also Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 29.

of the good, sometimes receiving the grace of God to grow and yet easily, almost casually, failing in ways big and small. Here the Catholic language of concupiscence and Lutheran and Calvinist awareness of the continuing power of sin after baptism converge upon the ecclesiological significance of our failures—as Yves Congar writes, "The presence of sinners in the church is not something accidental, a peripheral phenomenon: it represents something structural."[24] Who we are as church, as the concrete assembly of the faithful moving through history, cannot but be co-determined by the reality of sinfulness in our lives.

Sins of Leaders of the Church

In addition to this more general fact, we also need to ask about the fact of concupiscence and sin among those who are leaders in the church. While sins committed by ecclesial leaders have a more dramatic or powerful relation to the church, to the point that we can begin in some ways to talk not just about the sins of individuals but also about sins "of the church," it is important to situate the sins of ecclesial leaders as a subset of the more general condition of sinfulness in the church. This would be true in general, but it is especially true when "the church" is used as shorthand for "the pope" or "the bishops" or "the clergy." Similarly, at the level of popular piety, some of the attempts to reconcile ecclesial holiness and sinfulness that we turn to in the next chapter that distinguish the holiness of the church from the sins of its members maintain that elision, such that "members" of the church (read: laity) may sin, but the "church itself" (read: "clergy" or "hierarchy") do not. Both of these positions are in error, and so it must be stated forthrightly, first, that ecclesial sin belongs to all of the members of the church, and not simply its leaders, and, second, that ecclesial leaders do sin. In the words of Karl Rahner, "If what we said is true, then it is also self-evident that the official representatives of the Church . . . that those men too can be sinners, and in fact have been and are in a very noticeable way."[25]

24. Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 98.

25. Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 260.

At the first level, ecclesial leaders sin simply as private individuals, as members of the church, affected by concupiscence, who struggle in their own lives to be true to their baptism. They join the church in the petitions of the Our Father and in asking for prayer from their sisters and brothers in the *Confiteor*. In Lent, 2014, Pope Francis demonstrated that this need for continual repentance did not leave out any of the clergy when he surprised his collaborators at a communal penance service by first turning to the confessional himself to receive the sacrament before beginning to hear any confessions from others.

Sinfulness on the part of ecclesial leaders, especially clergy, complicates further our understanding of the sinfulness of the church because, as leaders, these actions can be said to be not simply sins *in* the church but, in a certain sense, *of* the church. In Rahner's trenchant words,

> Since they can in fact commit sin, since they can be culpably narrow, culpably egoistic, self-satisfied, obstinate, sensual, or indolent, this sinful attitude of theirs will naturally affect also those actions which they initiative precisely *as* ecclesiastics and in the name of the Church as acts of the concrete Church. There exists no dogma according to which the assistance of the Holy Spirit which always remains with the Church would limit the effect of the sinfulness of the men who administer the Church to their purely private lives and not permit it to have any influence on those events which must be characterised as unmistakably acts of the Church, if the concept of the Church is not to evaporate into the abstract ideal of an invisible Church.[26]

In North America in the early twenty-first century, it is impossible to write about sin on the part of the leaders of the church without thinking about clerical sexual abuse of minors and its enablement by senior clergy and bishops. My experience as a Roman Catholic in Boston as the depth and breadth of ecclesial failure was daily exposed in the *Boston Globe* is one of the reasons I'm attempting in this book to help us talk more honestly about the fact of ecclesial sinfulness. But there are also many, many far more prosaic, smaller stories of

26. Rahner, 261.

errors committed by ecclesial leaders—clerical and lay—that have wounded other human beings and can be seen as sins *of* the church. We might see errors caused simply by human limitation and weakness (an unthinking word by a parish priest at the end of a trying week, a tired theologian misspeaking in front of students), but there are also definite actions that are sins, from the gravest sins like the abuse of a child to the most venial, such as the avoidance of a parishioner or student in need out of annoyance or selfishness.

Sins of the Church—Social Sin

We can move, then, from discussion of the sin of individuals in the church to talk about the sinfulness of the church *as such*, of the sinfulness of the assembly of the faithful, in at least three distinct ways. First regarding actions committed by its leaders in the name of or on behalf of the church. Second, regarding the effects of past sins by leaders or other individuals upon the continuing life of the church. And third, though with more difficulty, about the possibility of describing collective actions on the part of the church as "sinful."

The first of these ways, in which sin is committed on behalf of the church by the leaders of the church, fits most easily with many of our previous assumptions of how to understand the church. If we understand the church by analogy to a political entity or to a "legal person," then the actions committed by those leaders have a fair claim to be considered actions "of the church." Individual members of the community might participate in those actions, or resist those actions, or remain entirely unconnected to those actions; for instance, a particular bishop's willing cooperation with a brutal or unjust military regime might easily be viewed as entailing the cooperation of the church with that regime, particularly if his cooperation involves the establishment of policies that further implicate various parts of his church. In addition to the individual, personal sin of the leader, such cases raise further questions about the culpability of those who enabled him to become or remain a bishop.

Such an action is never *only* individual, however, and leads to the second question—namely, how the actions of individual members of the church, leaders and lay faithful, priests and parishioners, can be considered not only as individual acts, but as acts negatively

impacting and deforming the church as a whole. In the question of Francis A. Sullivan, "How do the sins of its members affect the holiness of the church?" To start, one of the traditional ways of describing the effects of the sin of individuals upon the church as a whole, drawing upon metaphors of sin as defilement or a contamination,[27] has been to talk about how the sins of the members of the church "stain" or "blemish" the church. This is particularly often expressed when the church is gendered as either mother or bride; as Sullivan summarizes, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* emphasizes "that the sins of her sons and daughters have 'sullied' and 'disfigured' the face of the Church, and have 'hindered the bride of Christ from shining forth in all her beauty.'"[28] Rahner himself uses similar language, with reference to the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ: "But if she is something real, and if her members are sinners and as sinners remain members, then she herself is sinful. Then the sins of her children are a blot and a blemish on the holy mystical Body of Christ itself."[29] As Giuseppe Alberigo has documented, at the Second Vatican Council numerous bishops raised the issue of the sins of the church in this sense in their speeches in the aula.[30] Despite some opposition, this resulted in *Lumen Gentium*'s use of the idea of an *ecclesia semper purificanda*, always to be purified, also maintains this metaphorical cluster of ecclesial sin as "staining," "defiling," or otherwise "sullying" the beauty or purity of the church.

What I take such "blemish" and "stain" metaphors as indicating through such metaphorical language is an attempt to express how the sins of individual Christians have a lasting, continuing effect upon the church. At one level, this is simply the mystery of absence—because the members of the church do not fully live out their love for God and neighbor, the church is not all that it could or should be. But I want to press further how the sins of members of the church do not simply "stain" or "blemish" the face of the church, but also hinder the church in its mission in a more serious way. If such "blemishes"

27. See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 25–46.

28. Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members," 266.

29. Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 260.

30. Alberigo, *Chiesa Santa e Peccatrice*, 51–70, 81–104.

are not merely at the surface level, there may be value in turning to more systematic treatments of how sin affects social structures to investigate how the sins of individuals, both leaders and ordinary members, exist in a dynamic relationship with the presence of sin at the level of ecclesial structures.

As noted in chapter 2, much of the work of exploring the presence of sin in social structures has not been in ecclesiology, but in the work of liberation theologians, moral theologians, and, more recently, in Catholic social teaching as propounded by Catholic bishops and popes. Given a more traditional concept of sin as an act committed by a particular individual, the idea of attributing sinfulness to a social structure or to a particular set of institutions grew slowly within postconciliar Catholic theology. Liberation theologians and the postconciliar meetings of the Latin American bishops (CELAM) at Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979 used the language of "sinful situations" to reflect upon structural injustice and unjust political systems that result from individual sinful choices—so-called sin in the proper sense—but have an effect and an influence that extends beyond the act of a particular individual.[31] In the words of José Ignacio González Faus, the CELAM assemblies taught that "when human beings sin, they create structures of sin, which, in their turn, make human beings sin."[32]

The idea was further developed and brought into wider usage outside of Latin American theological reflection by Pope John Paul II. As analyzed by Gregory Baum,[33] Margaret Pfeil,[34] and Kristin Heyer,[35] John Paul II's use of the categories of "social sin" and "structures of sin" develops from his 1984 postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* through his use of the term in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and the encyclicals *Evangelium Vitae* and *Ut*

31. See Margaret Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002): 132–52, at 136–38. See also Kristin E. Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 410–36, at 420–25.

32. Cited in Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration," 422.

33. Gregory Baum, "Structures of Sin," in *The Logic of Solidarity*, ed. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 110–26.

34. Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications," 140–45.

35. Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration," 415–20.

Unum Sint, both promulgated in 1995. Especially in the earliest text, John Paul II expressed deep reservations about any conception of sin that would weaken the traditional concept of sin as a personal act. "For John Paul," Heyer writes, "social sin remains fundamentally personal because a situation or institutions is not properly the subject of moral acts."[36] In his later encyclicals, however, the pope, while still carefully circumscribing social sin to underline its analogous character in relation to individual, personal sins, seems more open to the phenomenon of sinful structures that result from the accumulation of such sins. He writes in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 16, "It is not out of place to speak of 'structures of sin,' which . . .are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the *concrete acts* of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the sources of other sins, and so influence people's behavior."[37] Both Pfeil and Heyer underline how the pope's usage differs from the analysis of CELAM and theologians inspired by liberationist analysis of unjust social structures; nevertheless, the pope's words provided an opening in which the reality of social sin and sinful social structures can be viewed as a real development within Catholic social teaching.

In an important essay, Daniel Finn further assists in analyzing the concept of social sin in relation to traditional, individualist moral theology and the realities addressed by liberation theology and, however hesitantly, by John Paul II.[38] He asks the seemingly basic but crucial questions, "What *is* a sinful social structure?" and "*How* is a social structure sinful?" (my emphasis). At the root of some of the shortcomings of magisterial treatment of social sin, Finn suggests, is a lack of philosophical and social theoretical clarity regarding the nature of social structures—the lack of a coherent answer to the further question, "What *is* a social structure?" Drawing upon critical realist sociology, Finn defines social structures as complex emergent realities that result from individual acts and yet are, in a sense, greater than the sum of those acts, in their persistence, their relative inde-

36. Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration," 416.

37. Cited in Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications," 141.

38. Daniel K. Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?" *Theological Studies* 71 (2016): 136–64.

pendence from any one act, and their causal effects upon future acts. He writes, "Social structures emerge from the actions of individuals and require the participation of individuals for their continued existence. But structures have an independent existence and independent causal effects in the lives of those individuals."[39] He concludes with four implications of a critical realist understanding of social structures relevant for a discussion of their sinfulness: "First, social structures are systems of social relations that emerge from the actions of individuals and are ontologically real even though not sense-perceptible. . . . Second, restrictions, enablements, and incentives (emergent properties of social structures) have causal impact on the persons taking on social positions, but this occurs through the exercise of individual agency and not in a deterministic way. . . . Third, this analysis applies not only to large social structures such as a nation's economic and political institutions, but also to parishes, clubs, and other organizations. Fourth, the causal impact of a social structure can be morally good . . . or morally bad."[40]

Finn's analysis then goes on to ask how one might describe a particular social structure as morally bad, as evil or sinful; given the caveat that "social structures are not conscious agents and so they cannot sin in any literal sense,"[41] how can we describe structures that have the effect of allowing or encouraging individuals in them to sin? Here Finn powerfully compares social sin and original sin, noting that in both cases the past sinful choices of others that precede the individual acts form a situation in which there is a tendency toward individual sin. For members of sinful social structures, as is the case for members of humanity affected by original sin, "the structure has causal power through the restrictions, enablements, and incentives faced by persons within it—which incline their free choices towards evil."[42] In such structures, large and small, a concupiscence-like power that is a more or less calcified residue of previous sins in the fullest sense has an overall damaging effect to those who take part in that structure. To be more concrete, for example, we could take the

39. Finn, 151.
40. Finn, 154.
41. Finn, 154.
42. Finn, 158.

example of systemic racism against African Americans in the United States, and, for clarity in the case, focus upon the United States in the early twentieth century. Whether in the redlining and casual cultural discrimination of northern states or the more formalized legal system of Jim Crow laws in the South, most white Americans grew up and were raised in a culture of unquestioned white supremacy. While it was possible for some individuals and communities to resist that system, they are often the exception that proves the rule, indicating both the pervasiveness and concupiscence-like causal power of past sinful decisions (the enactment of a particular law, the propounding of a particular theory of white supremacy or black inferiority) and the real yet not deterministic power of such a state of affairs. It was never impossible to be freed from racist attitudes and legal structures—but it was not easy, and the fundamentally unjust structure into which white Americans were born had a powerful causal effect, inclining their free acts toward further sin and perpetuation of such a system. If this understanding is correct, then we can begin to see unjust social structures as real, powerful, and sinful, though in a way distinct from and dependent upon the individual, personal actions that create and then are further encouraged by those structures.[43]

Can we begin to apply this idea of social sin to the church? Very early on, Gregory Baum asked the question of "whether the concept of 'structures of sin' applies to the Catholic Church as a social organization"; Baum was particularly concerned about what he viewed as the tendencies toward "autocratic rule and bureaucratic centralization" he found in the governance structures of the Catholic Church.[44] In a different context, it is striking that in *Ut Unum Sint*, his 1995 encyclical on commitment to ecumenism, John Paul II uses the concepts of "social sins" and "sinful structures" to describe sins of past leaders and the continuing effects of those sins upon the divisions of church. Sullivan writes that this "would be the first time that 'social sins' and 'sinful structures' have been attributed to the Church in a document of the magisterium."[45] How can this be, given Catholic

43. See Katie Grimes, *Christ Divided: Antiblackness as Corporate Vice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

44. See Baum, "Structures of Sin," 123–25.

45. Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members," 261.

belief in the divinely instituted nature of its basic structures? Only if we distinguish between believing that particular structures like the sacraments or the threefold ministry are divinely instituted as part of God's economy of salvation in Christ and that those structures will always be exercised properly. The history of the church, and particular the history of many of its councils, is a history of calls for "reform in head and members," not to change the basic, God-given structures of the church but to return them to their proper functioning.

More troubling, and yet necessary to face, is the idea that the church, as a human assembly that exists in and through various times and places, is a part of those times and places rather than floating serenely above them, and so will be affected by the particular systemic injustices, assumptions, misjudgments, and sinfulness of the times and places in which it lives and breathes. And, more dangerously, it is likely that, like most people of goodwill in that time and place, such sinfulness will be the result of a blind spot, a culpable ignorance, rather than an intentional turning away from the Gospel.[46] To the extent to which the church is human—and therefore subject to the continuing tendencies of a concupiscence, which is not only individual but has the power to distort or corrupt entire societies and social structures—the church must be on alert to the ways in which it must walk further in its pilgrimage and how, tragically given the fact of its responsibility to make Christ present in the world, its own social life and structures can be affected by the sins of its members and so hinder it in its mission. As Rahner warns us, the church can be sinful "in a way in which she alone can be sinful . . .; for she alone can distort by her sin the eternal visible presence of Christ in the world which she is and so wrap a shroud about him—and do this in the face of men who must seek him as a matter of life and death!"[47]

Sins of the Church—Collective Actions

Finally, another distinct yet closely related way in which we might begin to ask about the sinfulness of the church is to consider whether we can speak about the church, the assembly of believers as a complex

46. Here we could draw upon Bernard Lonergan's conception of bias. See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

47. Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 262.

body, collectively "sinning" or collectively "acting" in a sinful manner. This is distinct from the sinful acts of individual members of the church, and distinct from the "social sin" that might result from those individual acts in the structures of the church or the way those structures operate in a regular basis. What I want to investigate is how we might begin to talk about instances in which the church collectively acts and, more exactly, when the church in particular places and times acts in such a way that saying "that church sinned" or, more appropriately, that "we sinned" as a collective body makes the most sense of those events.

To do so requires a bit of a detour to explore the nature of collective action and how to talk about collective action or intentionality as analogous to individual action. What makes discussing collective sin by the church difficult is in some sense a pre-theological problem, rather than a theological problem; before we can discuss the question of sin committed by the church, or the ways in which the sin committed by leaders of the church is, in some ways, sin committed by the community, we need some philosophical tools to think about any kind of shared collective action, whether sinful, holy, or neither.

In the history of the treatment of sin committed by the church, we can see some of the difficulties caused by not having a coherent theory of collective action. The theologian who wrestled most to try to describe the phenomenon was, not surprisingly, Yves Congar. In his work, Congar struggled to outline how the sins of individual members of the church affect not only those sinners, but the mission of the church as a whole. It is worth tracing the development of his thought in some detail here in order to explain the importance of the question. He starts with the classical distinction between sins, which are the acts of an individual, and what he will later refer to as a "third term" between the holy church and our sins,[48] a difficult-to-translate category of the "miseries" or the "pitiful things"[49] (in French, *les misères*) of the church: "Sins, in the moral and exact sense of the word,

48. Congar, *True and False Reform*, 115.

49. I take this translation of "*misères*" as "pitiful things" from Paul Philibert's translation of the same word, in the same context, from the revised 1968 edition of *Vrai et fausse réforme dans l'Église*. See Congar, *Vrai et fausse réforme*, 1968, 123, and Congar, *True and False Reform*, 115.

must be distinguished from limits, delays, historical mistakes [*fautes*]: one could say, sins from pitiful things."[50] He continues, "One cannot attribute a moral act as such to a group [*une collectivité*]. But one can attribute to it mistakes, shortcomings, misunderstandings, mediocrities."[51] He then compares such mistakes to those made by the nation of France in Algeria, in the name of the nation, and how those mistakes are attributed primarily to the governmental officials. Similarly, the historic mistakes of the church should be attributed primarily to its leaders: "the pope, bishops, [religious] superiors, theologians[!]." But, he writes, "We must not fail to see the tight connection that exists between the sins, that have persons as their subject, and the 'pitiful things' of which the Church, considered concretely, can be the subject and even bear responsibility for."[52] He concludes this section, reiterating a distinction between our knowledge of the church and God's, by suggesting that the formula in which "the church is holy, but her members sin" is accurate *if*, at the same time, we attend to "this order of 'pitiful things' or historical mistakes which particularly today lead to questions and sometimes scandal. Do they affect the Church? Is the Church their subject? Yes, they affect and have for a subject what *we* call the Church."[53] On one level, Congar is simply talking about something like "social sin" or "sinful structures." But he pushes further, asking not only about the continuing, accumulated effects of past individual sins, but about the question of when we, acting

50. Congar, *Sainte Église*, 145. "Il faut distinguer les péchés au sens moral et propre du mot, et les limites, retards, fautes historiques: on pourrait dire, les péchés et les misères."

51. Congar, 146. "On ne peut attribuer un acte moral comme tel à une collectivité. Mais on peut lui attribuer des fautes, des manquements, des incompréhensions, des médiocrités."

52. Congar, 146. "Il ne faut évidemment pas manquer de voir les connexions étroites qui existent entre les péchés, qui ont pour sujet les personnes, et les misères, dont l'Église, concrètement considérée, peut être le sujet et même porter la responsabilité."

53. Congar, 147. "En sorte qu'au total, je souscrirais à la formule de Mgr Journet (l'Église est sainte, bien que faite de pécheurs), mais en la complétant par la considération de cet ordre des misères ou des fautes historiques sur lesquelles portent d'ailleurs plus particulièrement aujourd'hui les questions et parfois le scandale. Touchent-elles l'Église? L'Église en est-elle le sujet? Oui, elle touchent, elles ont pour sujet ce que *nous* appelons l'Église."

together as a body called the church, fail in our love of God and neighbor.

Congar suggests that the church is the subject of this third category of "miseries," as above, and later adds a more passive sense of "the pitiful things [*misères*], the more or less seriously harmful things, that happen to the church itself and to the exercise of its ministry."[54] In this discussion, however, we can see him working to distinguish personal sins, sins committed by leaders on behalf of a community, and "historical mistakes" or "pitiful things" that are in some way the action of the community as a whole. As a start, however, it seems unsatisfactory. In his operative theory of moral action, only individual persons act, in the proper sense, and those actions can affect the community; but there is also some way in which the acts of the leaders of the community, or the acts of the community as a whole, are real acts, with the community of the whole as a subject. While not sin, these acts can be "mistakes," "shortcomings," "pitiful things"—in other words, sin-like. His initial analogy is legal and political, which is not surprising given that legal and political thought have functioned as the default social theory of Christian ecclesiology for some time.[55] But the political model is only one aspect of attempting to understand collective agency and responsibility, and there are other more recent philosophical treatments of collective agency, particularly in relation to collective guilt. Congar's work was groundbreaking in its initial consideration of how the church can collectively make mistakes, but drawing upon some other theories of collective agency will help to further clarify how we can talk about the church as sinful—and as holy.

Philosophical treatment of such issues as shared intentionality, shared agency, group intentionality, and group agency has grown dramatically in recent decades, particularly among philosophers in the Anglo-American analytic tradition.[56] Greater appropriation within

54. Congar, *True and False Reform*, 115.

55. See Joseph Komonchak, "Foundations in Ecclesiology," ed. Fred Lawrence, Suppl. issue, *Lonergan Workshop* 11 (1995).

56. See, among others, the groundbreaking work of Margaret Gilbert in, for instance, Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); *Sociality and Responsibility* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); and *Joint Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Raimo Tuomela, *Social*

ecclesiology of the results of this important work in social theory will be necessary in coming years if ecclesiologists are to take seriously what we think we mean when we talk about "the church teaching" or "the church acting" in a more systematic, less naive way. A full engagement with these authors, however, would go far beyond the scope of this current project and lead us too far afield. Nevertheless, a brief survey of some of the issues they treat and conclusions they reach will be helpful in wrapping our minds around their ideas. As Deborah Perron Tollefsen summarizes in beginning her introduction to the field, the starting point for many of these philosophers is attempting to make sense of the way in which we habitually speak about groups of people (a nation, a family, a corporation, an organization) acting, thinking, being responsible, having views, etc., in both everyday usage and more technically in social scientific research. "What are we to make of this practice?" she asks. "Are groups agents like us? Do they act on the basis of reasons, judge, deliberate? Do they have minds? And, if they do have minds, can they be held morally responsible?"[57] Or, in the words of Margaret Gilbert, "When we talk about *our* goals, beliefs, values, and so on—what are we talking about?"[58]

While much is contested in this area of philosophy, there is agreement among some of these philosophers about the following points. First, though using different vocabulary, they often uphold an important distinction between collections of people or aggregates of people, and more organized, voluntary, or otherwise structured groups or corporate entities—the difference between "everyone named Dominic within a 5-mile-radius" and "the Dominicans."[59] Corporate or

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Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Michael Bratman, *Shared Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). For survey texts of the state of the field, see Larry May and Stacey Hoffman, eds., *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991); Frederick F. Schmitt, ed., *Socializing Metaphysics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); and Deborah Perron Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

57. Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents*, 2.

58. Gilbert, *Joint Commitment*, 6.

59. See, for instance, Gilbert, *Joint Commitment*, 59; and Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents*, 3.

organized groups have distinct properties; "the Dominicans" might organize a party or a procession in a way that the Dominics could not and would not. Second, they take seriously the rootedness of human agency in individual human beings; as in the traditional Catholic positions on sin noted above and in chapter 2, these philosophers are generally conservative regarding the dependence of group actions upon the actions of the individuals who compose them; "groups are composed of individuals and they act via the actions of individuals,"[60] and there is not some entity acting or intending except in and through the actions and intentions of discrete human persons. But, third, unlike some reductionist forms of individualism, they understand the phenomenon of individuals coming together as bringing into existence something new and different from simply a conglomeration of discrete individual actions, what Gilbert most often refers to as a "plural subject" and Tuomela as a "group agent." In Gilbert's words, the parties to the joint commitment that brings such a "plural subject" into being "are jointly committed *as far as possible to emulate, by virtue of the actions of each, with respect to its intending, a single body* that intends to do the thing in question."[61] While a different form of existence than, say, that of a single biological actor, these thinkers underline the fact that *groups exist*, and that it is reductionist to see their existence or acting as simply the epiphenomenon of parallel, individual actions. When we act as a "we" rather than a series of "I's," the whole is greater, or at least different, from its parts.[62] This parallels, though from very different methodological starting points, the "critical realist" views of the emergence of complex collective entities utilized by Daniel Finn in his attempts to understand social

60. Tollefsen, 4.

61. Gilbert, *Joint Commitment*, 116.

62. Interestingly, this form of "we-consciousness" seems to be one of the distinguishing factors of human evolutionary psychology; wolves, chimpanzees, and other pack animals, for instance, often collaborate in, say, hunting, but are instinctually conditioned such that their attempts to satisfy their individual desires create the conditions by which they work together effectively; but according to Michael Tomasello, among others, this is a different form of group action than of conceiving of the group as a "we" planning to share in a group activity. See, for instance, Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

structures as "systems of social relations that emerge from the actions of individuals and are ontologically real even though not sense-perceptible."[63] Both critical realist social theory and these philosophers of joint action suggest that we need to take the unique properties of human beings acting as a more or less organized "we" seriously as a distinct mode of human action.

Fourth, and importantly for our topic, there has been much discussion in this field of philosophy about how to construe groups as "responsible" or plural subjects as "moral subjects." This is true particularly with regard to groups that come into being and change over time; a plural subject brought into being in one time and place may maintain its shared goals, values, and structure, while the individual members have changed over time. This is the social theoretical equivalent of replacing each plank in the ship of Theseus and asking whether it is the same boat. (As we will see, belief in the communion of saints complicates this question further.) The social group or the plural subject, therefore, has a certain relative autonomy in relation to any particular members, which raises important questions with regard to the responsibilities, if any, of the current members in relation to the group's past moral actions.

Some of these ideas may seem obvious or as an unnecessary complication of the ordinary way in which we speak about "what we are doing" or "who we are." But ecclesiology is only beginning to take seriously, in my opinion, the challenges of thinking about group action and has tended to leave these questions unexamined and default to one of two inadequate positions. First, and most frequently, ecclesiology has historically defaulted to a hierarchical political model of group agency; "what the church does" is then reduced to "what the pope does," "how the bishops act," "what the pastor says," etc. This is not a false description of much ecclesial collective action; the leaders of the church set the direction of the group, and the members participate in the joint action by their cooperation, or selective cooperation, in those directed ends. But by itself, this model of collective agency is inadequate; not every action of the members of the church as a body occurs along the analogy of a nation starting or ending a war under the direction of its leaders, or of a policy being enacted by

63. Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?" 154.

a representative assembly and then obeyed by its citizens. Christians come together and act in ways good and bad that do not always fit the model of a hierarchical polity. Indeed, some of the most important things that the church does, or fails to do, in gathering, praying, and acting occur not because the faithful are cooperating with the direction of a political leader, but out of what the Second Vatican Council calls "the supernatural sense of the faith," the *sensus fidei*, that is a charism of the entire church (*Lumen Gentium*, 12).

A second common way of modeling collective ecclesial action tends toward the systematic individualism of some forms of sociological and economic analysis, in which the collective action of the church can be understood and analyzed as the aggregate of the individual choices of Christians. These choices can be analyzed statistically, as trends emerge from individual choices revealing some of the overall thoughts, values, and actions of the church. This information is crucial, and ecclesiology would do well to better integrate such analysis into its study of the church; institutions such as CARA, the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate, and the Pew Research Center produce detailed, dependable quantitative data on what Christians are doing and why they say they are doing it. Greater attention to this second sense of how the church "acts" collectively would be very helpful in preventing ecclesiologists from speaking only about the church as it ought to be in the minds of theologians and more about how it actually is on the ground, where individuals vote with their feet—and their wallets—in their Christian discipleship and more or less adequately embody the ideals of the community. Given the complexity, it would be mistaken to simply read the "sense of the faithful" off of such sociological data,[64] but much greater attention to the actual facts on the ground of the life of the church is the great leap forward necessary in ecclesiology in the coming decades. But while crucial, relying solely upon a model of the church in which collective action can only be understood as aggregated individual is too limited an approach to collective action.

Additional ways of understanding collective action, therefore, as something different from a political body and different from aggre-

64. See Jerome Baggett, "Becoming Absence-Minded: Sociological Reflections on the Sense of the Faithful," *CTSA Proceedings* 70 (2015): 1–26.

gated individual actions remain to be developed. Growth in our understanding of how "we, the church" do things, not as a collection of individuals but also not only in formalized legal structures, is a major place for further development in ecclesiology. How, for instance, can we better philosophically and theologically understand the phenomenon of a small group of Christians acting as church to preach the Gospel and build up the reign of God, or acting as church and failing to do so? When a group of parishioners work to eliminate homelessness in their area, or a group of parishioners work to prevent immigrants from moving into their country—and both experience themselves doing so *as church*—there is a need to explore more carefully the ecclesiological consequences of such kinds of collective action. The categories worked out to describe the phenomena of sinful social structures are helpful here, but might be complemented by these other methods for understanding shared actions and plural subjects.

To return, therefore, to the topic at hand, if we consider that the church, like any other group, has the potential to act as a plural subject or engage in shared activity, and that in doing so there is something different from simply an aggregate of individual actions, a whole that is greater than or at least different from its parts, then the possibility of that action being sinful must be considered. If this is the case, then, in addition to sins by individual members, sins by leaders that affect the entire church, and sinful social structures in which past sins coagulate into unjust systems and concupiscence-like inducements to sin, there is a fourth way in which the church can be and has been sinful—in the phenomena of Christians acting together, as Christians, in ways that are failures in love of God and neighbor.

Two tragic examples might help in exploring this phenomena and, importantly, they have been chosen not out of a sense of moral superiority but because the clarity of these two more extreme examples helps to illustrate most clearly ecclesial failure, something that occurs regularly, often in far less dramatic ways. In the more distant past, during armed conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, despite the numerous complicating factors of other socioeconomic and political realities, one can find instances in which members of the church acted collectively—as a "joint plural subject" in Gilbert's terms—to carry out actions that we might judge gravely sinful. The St. Bartholomew's Day

Massacre in Paris in 1570 provides a particularly gruesome instance in which, albeit under the direction of political leaders, thousands of Protestant Huguenot Christians (the exact number is in dispute) were killed in Paris and the countryside of France by Catholic Christians who seem to have understood what they were doing *as a Catholic thing to do*. That is, over three days of popular violence in Paris and elsewhere, Protestant men, women, and children were murdered by Catholics acting as a Catholic "we"—acting together as church, however misguided or wrong that action might have been.[65]

Another painful example of such a collective ecclesial failure from recent history is the participation of large numbers of Catholic Christians in the 1994 genocide of Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda. While the situation in Rwanda in 1994 is similarly complex, it seems clear that at some level churches, as clergy, religious, and lay Christians, acted together to massacre their fellow citizens—and, often, their fellow Catholics.[66] Some theory of the community failing collectively seems to make the most sense both of the events and of the response of the Catholic Church in Rwanda to those events: in a 2016 apology at the conclusion of the Year of Mercy, the Rwandan Conference of Catholic bishops wrote the following: "We apologize for all the wrongs the church committed. We apologize on behalf of all Christians for all forms of wrongs we committed. We regret that church members violated [their] oath of allegiance to God's commandments."[67] The bishops in this statement claim a broad definition of the "we" who committed wrongs, even if they avoided the explicit language of "we sinned," that is explicable more easily if we claim some way of speaking about the collective sins committed by the church in that particular time and place.

65. See Barbara Diefendorf, *The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford, 2008).

66. See Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (New York: Picador, 1999); Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Picador, 2006); and Jean Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Picador, 2007).

67. "Rwanda Genocide: Catholic Church Sorry for Role of Priests and Nuns in Killings," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/21/rwanda-genocide-catholic-church-sorry-for-role-of-priests-and-nuns-in-killings.

These two examples are intentionally shocking in their clarity in order to help us imagine new language for speaking about the sinfulness of the church. But they differ in degree, rather than kind, from all of the more common forms of collective sin we can observe in the history and contemporary reality of the church, both "social sin" coagulated into unjust social structures and these more troubling forms of communal failure in the living out of the Gospel. If we return to an ecclesiology that pays attention to the local church, and to the church spread throughout time and place as a communion of more particular assemblies rooted in their own cultures and soils, we can begin to expect that, just as the holiness of any particular local church or smaller group of Christians will be distinctive to its time and place, the challenges and the possibilities of failure on the part of a church will also be distinctive. In addition to the holy church of Chambon-sur-Ligne that worked as a church to save its Jewish population during the Nazi occupation, there were churches that actively collaborated, as church, with the regime to round up their Jewish population—and that, far more often, responded with half-measures, self-protection, and the preservation of culpable ignorance. In every time and place, the church as assembled in that place has unique possibilities of holiness and sinfulness, and the variegated history of the church can be read as a history of successes and failures in its pilgrimage.

Ecclesial Sin, Conversion, and Repentance

Is this not all a bit too negative, a bit too depressing, or a bit too scandalous to dredge up the sinful past of the church in any form? What might distinguish faithful, Christian truth-telling about the mistakes of the past from the gleeful finger-pointing of those for whom this history is yet more evidence of Christian hypocrisy or a proof of the falsity of Christian claims? While we cannot talk about the church's sinfulness without lifting up its holiness, truth-telling about ecclesial failure is necessary—first, as a warning and, second, as an opportunity for shared repentance in the communion of saints.

As a warning, we need to avoid the presentist or progressivist temptation that ecclesial failure, individual sins, social sin, or collective sin are phenomena of the past and that the church of today has

sufficiently advanced toward the kingdom that it is beyond such vulnerability. Careful attention to ecclesial social sin and sinful social agency means telling the truth about when the church has participated in and perpetuated forms of injustice, structures of exploitation, and systems of evil. Attention to the past is crucial here—we have examples that are no less tragic for being turned into clichés by some opponents of Christianity or of organized religion, like the way in which missionary expansion and conquest was carried out, the violence of the Crusades and the inquiries of various Inquisitions, the cooperation of churches, both leaders and assemblies as a whole, with oppressive political regimes across the centuries. But one danger in only taking our evidence from the past is that the potential of the church to fail may appear past. Retelling the dangerous narratives of ecclesial failure—dangerous to our sense of holiness and dangerous to our self-sufficiency—ought not be directed toward corroding our faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but it should keep us alert and awake to the signs of our times. If the church has stumbled and wandered in its pilgrimage in the past, these stories should be told as a warning to avoid false complacency regarding the perfection of the pilgrim church. It is a truth of faith that the Holy Spirit will never abandon the church in its error; but that dogma does not mean that the church grows toward the reign of God without human freedom and openness, individually and collectively, to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Telling the stories of our ecclesial failures also provides the foundation to respond to those failures in prayer, and specifically in prayers of lament, of mourning, and of repentance. The models of collective ecclesial action noted above, which start from our observed experience of the natural realities of human life, have difficulty taking account of the theological mystery of the communion of saints. But if we consider the connection of all Christians in the church across time and space—including those living, those who went before us, and, in the eternal knowledge of God, those who will follow us—then some way of thinking about the communion of saints as connecting us both in our graced moments of fidelity to Christ *and* in our individual and collective failures will allow us to view not only holiness as shared across time, but also sinfulness. As Bradford Hinze writes, "In light of the developing doctrine of social sin, and what it implies

about collective responsibility and accountability, we are now being called upon to reconsider this ancient doctrine so that the *communio sanctorum* can be recognized, in humility and with no malice implied, as a *communio peccatorum*,"[68] a communion of sinners. It is precisely through the realism of the communion of the faithful across time that, rather than standing in judgment upon the sins of our forebears, we can pray not just for them, but *with* them; we can not only repent for our own actions, but in a certain sense truly repent for them as part of the "we" that is speaking, as can be seen in the statement above from the bishops of Rwanda. As Hinze writes, in answer to his question, "What can the living do for the dead, for the communion of saints who were *also* the bearers of social sin?": "One can acknowledge, as a grace and a light received, the complex reality of sin, including social sin. One can repent for the sins of which our forebears were not subjectively aware, yet which one acknowledges as objective disorder, bias in judgments, harm in decisions, distortion in discourse. And by repenting of these social sins, the Church can be called upon to change, to make satisfaction. We honor God and venerate the dead by struggling to purify the Church of social sin by changing."[69]

Claiming a stronger sense of the ecclesial "we" not only in our shared holiness but in our shared sinfulness, therefore, allows the church to lament where it has stumbled and to repent for its past mistakes as the first step of greater conversion, in a way that not only will be beneficial to the further growth of the church on its pilgrimage, but also will make clearer to us and to a watching world our belief in the reality and danger of sin, and our belief in the reality and grace of repentance and forgiveness. In our explicitly acknowledging and lamenting our errors, ecclesial repentance can be more than a scandal; it can enfold the real, and continuing, errors of the church in the healing power of Christ, by telling the dangerous stories of the victims of ecclesial sin and honoring them through conversion toward greater fidelity to the Gospel. If Pope John Paul II, in the Day of Pardon service of the year 2000, had been able more explicitly, as it seems he intended, to claim the ecclesial "we" and to repent as church for our

68. Bradford Hinze, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 232–33.

69. Hinze, 233.

past sins, rather than only pray for those who had sinned in the past, the service might have been, for the church and for a watching world, a truer witness of faithful discipleship. The explanation for why it was not is rooted in a particular way of construing the relationship between ecclesial sin and ecclesial holiness that hindered the church's ability to name itself as sinful; that question is the subject of the following chapter.

Ecclesial Sinfulness in the Liturgy

Before moving to that relationship, however, as a form of conclusion I want to return once more to the liturgical experience in which I hope these ecclesiological reflections are rooted. I have outlined here four interrelated ways of understanding the church as sinful. First, in our individual sins as members of the church, both our small daily failures and the larger, more deadly failures in love of God and neighbor made by members of our church. Second, in the sins of our leaders—lay, religious, and clerical—that more clearly affect our actions as church, particularly given the public role of many of our clergy, theologians, lay ministers, and religious. Third, in the phenomenon of social sin, the concupiscence-like residue of past individual sins, often marked by the biases and blindnesses of the times and places in which the church exists, that produce a tendency toward further individual sinfulness. And fourth, in the possibility of collective sinful action distinct from the residue of social sin, in which we, in different forms and sizes of church, stumble in our pilgrim way.

One way of becoming more conscious of the possibilities offered in the prayer of the church would be by expanding the sense of the first-person plural in which we pray the petition of the Our Father to "forgive us our trespasses," as well as the related prayers of repentance throughout the eucharistic prayer. When we come before God asking that he have mercy on "us," that "us" is wide enough to include all of us as individuals, all our leaders and teachers, all of us as held down and bent over by the sins of the past, and all of us, in that assembly and every assembly gathered around word and table who have, together, failed as church to be church, to be the sacrament of God's love we are called to be. Imagining or re-imagining our ecclesial "we" in its fullness would allow us to connect our own

individual failures with the failures of the church, neither in glee nor in scandal, as the freedom with which God has chosen to allow the church to walk on its pilgrimage toward the fullness of the reign of God. There is a mystery in our coming together each Sunday in the Eucharist, and each time we pray the Lord's Prayer together, in that we are individually and collectively sinners, and individually and collectively still loved by God and called to greater conversion. The rhythm I highlighted in the first chapter—of our moving toward God, our recognition of our unworthiness, and our yet being brought into communion with the Living One in Christ and the Spirit—is not an anomaly, not a preliminary to an idealized "real" life of the church; it is the basic rhythm of conversion by which God has chosen to save us.

CHAPTER 5

Avoiding the Paradox of the Holy and Sinful Church

The focus of this chapter and the following is the serious question the previous chapters raise—how do we hold together these two aspects of the church's reality, its indefectible sanctity and the reality of its sinfulness? Holiness and sinfulness are not direct opposites—as we saw above, holiness is more than simply the absence of sin; it is participation in the life and love of God—but since sin by its nature tends to prevent greater participation in the life and love of God, it is difficult to understand how these two realities coexist in the same church. Ecclesial holiness and sinfulness are mysterious, in a deep sense, but for different reasons; the depth of ecclesial holiness is made mysterious by its participation in the overabundant mystery of God, and the shallowness and incomprehensibility of ecclesial sin is caused by the mystery of evil, the mystery of the absence of what ought to be present in God's assembly. Obviously attempting to explore the relationship between these two realities compounds our difficulty in trying to understand the church.

So why try? Why not leave the mystery of the church's holiness and sinfulness just that, a mystery? At a first glance, and in many situations, this is a perfectly adequate response. Most of the Christians I know rightly spend more time thinking about how they will live their Christian lives in relationship to God and neighbor, and, when they think about the church, they think about it most often in terms of how they are participating in the church's mission to make God better known and loved in the world in order to prepare the way for the reign of God. Ecclesial holiness and ecclesial sin are known by them in the daily living out of their baptism, and the joy

of the one and the sadness of the other are more experienced than questioned, more lived than queried.

But for some of us, and in some particular times and places, we must resist the urge to prematurely throw our hands up in the air before the paradox of the church. Particularly in the United States, in the early twenty-first century, we need more clarity on how the church's holiness and sinfulness coexist in our church, for a few reasons. First, experiences of ecclesial sinfulness have raised these questions in numerous ways in the past few decades for many Christians, particularly in my own Roman Catholic Church, and more particularly in the experience of Roman Catholics in dioceses affected by the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and attempts to cover up that abuse. But however jarring, recent experience of ecclesial sinfulness is not limited to the sexual abuse crisis. Ecclesial complicity in racism and white supremacy, both historically and today, leads many to question how we can continue to call a church holy that, in just one example among many, sold 272 enslaved women, men, and children to preserve its institutions.[1] The perception of systemic injustice in church structures and institutions as discriminatory or actively harmful to persons of color, women, and LGBT people has become for many an increasingly challenging mark of ecclesial failure. And in addition to such major stumbling blocks put in the path of people's belief in ecclesial holiness, one can point to all of the smaller failures caused by sin and, at times, by simple human limitations—the unkind word of a pastor, the hypocrisy of a clique of parish leaders, the neglect of the migrant or the vulnerable in our midst.

Second, compounding this experience of the failures of the church, mistaken or inadequate theologies of the relation between ecclesial holiness and sin have done much to further undermine Christians' relationship with the church. To continue with examples from my own Catholic Church in the United States, a mistaken theology of ecclesial holiness that conflated holiness and inerrancy in all matters practical and theological compounded the sexual abuse crisis in at

1. See Rachel Swarns, "272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It Owe Their Descendants?" *Washington Post,* April 16, 2016. See also Katie Grimes, *Christ Divided: Antiblackness as Corporate Vice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

least two ways. First, contributing to the mismanagement of the actions of abusing clergy was a desire to preserve a facade of ecclesial perfection at all costs. Fear of scandal that would mar the perfect image of "Holy Mother Church" or the "Spotless Bride of Christ" led bishops to close cases or reassign abusing clergy quietly and without transparency, valuing the unsullied image of the church and a brittle conception of ecclesial holiness more than the safety of minors or the needs of victims. And, second, when the full reality of church sexual abuse did become clear, many Catholics were unable to imagine a kind of ecclesial holiness that took account of the reality of sin in the church. A whole system of supposed ecclesial perfection came crashing down, taking with it many Catholics' ability to trust the church or see it as in any way the continuing presence of God. As one New England Catholic said to me after the revelations of the early 2000s, explaining why he no longer considered himself a believer, "I think they've been lying to us about everything this whole time."

Such a postscandal context, and others like it, raises new questions—how, in the face of disillusion or despair can one see in the church not only ecclesial sin or failure, but also holiness? Further, how can we speak about the relation between ecclesial sin and holiness in such a way that it becomes clear that the holiness of God, and not our human sin, has the last word in the life and history of the church? In a United States marked by disillusion with most institutions and distrust of most structures of authority—in government, media, business, and social life more broadly—it seems important to challenge quiet desperation about the possibilities of human communities and structures with realistic Christian hope that holiness is possible, not only in the fullness of the reign of God but here and now in the complex history of the church.

This chapter begins the work, then, of trying to unpack the mystery of the relationship between ecclesial holiness and sin a bit more, fully conscious of the limitations that theology encounters in relation to mystery. I do so by outlining some of the major theological strategies used to explain the paradox of their coexistence in the church, particularly in the past century, and then, in the following chapter, by outlining an attempt to make some sense of this mystery. In evaluating some past proposals and outlining my own, which is in many ways simply a restatement of some of the best ideas of the past fifty

years, I will be using two sets of criteria. First, I want to find a way of talking about ecclesial sin and holiness together that can incorporate what was said about holiness and sin in the previous chapters of this book. For example, an adequate treatment of this topic must be able to account not only for future holiness in the full reign of God, but also for the phenomena of holy women and men, and holy communities, in the history of the church. Similarly, an adequate ecclesiology must be able to take account of collective holiness and collective sinfulness as realities of the church on its pilgrimage toward the reign of God. Second, I will be attempting again to return regularly to the liturgical ecclesiology outlined in the first chapter—do these ecclesiological strategies reflect the primary theology of the church's liturgy? Do they say in more discursive terms what the church expresses about its sinfulness and holiness in its prayer? My hope is that the proposal in the following chapter can be seen as integrally reflective of what the church already says about itself regularly in the form of ritual prayer.

Dividing the Church between Holy and Sinful

One of the earliest and most obvious strategies for reconciling the holiness and sinfulness of the church has been, and in more subtle forms continues to be, that of denying one of the two realities of the church or dividing the church in two. That is, an attempt is made to preserve the holiness of the church by denying its sinfulness or, in some cases, to take account of the real sinfulness of the church by denying its holiness. The first strategy, which we might loosely call a sectarian or perfectionist strategy, has recurred repeatedly in the history of the church in various attempts to preserve the purity or sanctity of the church by establishing a sharp dividing line between the church and any form of sin. As Hans Küng catalogs these attempts, "In primitive times Gnostics, Novationists, Donatists and Montanists, in medieval times the Cathars, and in modern times various enthusiasts and sectaries have all attempted to exclude sinful members from the church."[2] As noted above, in addition to 1 John 1:8's statement that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves," the

2. Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 322.

Council of Carthage in 418 formally condemned as heretical those who say that when "the saints say in the Lord's prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses' (Matt 6:12), that they say this not for themselves, because that petition is not now necessary for them, but for others who are sinners among their people."[3] One can sometimes find such positions in some smaller churches and communities, particularly those whose doctrine of sanctification or Christian perfection through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit leads to a teaching of the personal indefectibility of the members of the church.

In less formal ways, as well, we can see this move in the tendency of some Christians to exclude or deny the reality of sin within their own church. In my youth, the pastor of my parish put up a sign in the entrance of the church reading "Only Sinners Welcome Here" and promptly lost a number of parishioners offended by the idea. Another subtle way of denying the existence of sinfulness and sinners within the church is to deny that grave sinners are "really" members of the church or that we have anything in common with them. We tend to speak and act as though the organized crime patriarch, the corrupt politician, the unrepentant criminal—the examples could continue ad nauseam—were not "really" part of our church or, in recent years, we distinguish them from "practicing" Catholics or "practicing" Christians. And yet, while there is truth that their membership in the church may be deeply flawed, and they may be members of the church " 'bodily' not 'in their hearts,' " as *Lumen Gentium* 14 states, the difficult teaching here is that these people are still part of the church, and who they are is part of who we are. As Rahner writes, "*This* sinner belongs to *this* Church: he is not merely entered in her official register, a part of the visible presence of God's grace in the world, a member of the Body of Christ!"[4] To deny the reality of sin in the church, therefore, in large ways or small, formally or informally, leads to a distorted understanding of the composition of the community.

At the same time, there is an equally flawed and opposite form of pessimism regarding the holiness of the church, sometimes posing

3. Council of Carthage, Canon 7, DS 107.

4. Karl Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," *Theological Investigations VI*, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (New York: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1969), 257.

as a form of empirical or theological realism, that so emphasizes the flawed reality of the church that it denies its real participation in the holiness of God. This can come from two directions. First, from outside of the church, particularly from a suspicious or skeptical nonreligious observer, the idea that a community marked by such faults could be holy, could be connected to God and helping to make God present in the world, seems ludicrous at best and an ideological attempt to avoid criticism or responsibility at worst. From such a hermeneutics of suspicion—not entirely unwarranted, obviously—the sorry history of the followers of Christ failing in their stated goals and values seems to rule out categorically the possibility of ecclesial holiness. From here we can see some of the logic of a quote often attributed to Gandhi, "I'd be Christian if not for the Christians." Second, from within the Christian experience, some forms of Christian life and practice that take the sinful tendencies of human beings very seriously can lead to a quieter but no less real pessimism about the holiness of the church. For example, some forms of Calvinist thought that emphasize how Christian holiness always remains an "alien holiness" or a "declared holiness" question the possibility of the participation of the church in the holiness of God. In such discussions of extrinsic or forensic holiness, which do not reflect the views of all Calvinist or Protestant theologians, the church remains at heart a community of sinners, whose holiness remains *solely* that of Christ, rather than a gift that Christ shares with his church. In both cases, a Catholic theology of the holiness of the church requires attention to the reality of individual and collective holiness within the church, a real historical holiness made possible by the church's election, its formal elements, and its eschatological destiny.

A second way of attempting to preserve belief in the holiness of the church in the face of ecclesial sinfulness involves dividing the church in two, so that the holy church is, in some way, different from the sinful church or disconnected from that which is sinful. This attempt to resolve the paradox of ecclesial sin and holiness can be seen as a more subtle continuation of the first attempt to deny that that which is sinful "really" belongs to the church. This strategy is rooted in something important: the distinction between the pilgrim church and its fulfillment in the reign of God, or the visible, mixed church with its sinful members, and the invisible communion of those

in whom the grace received in baptism is truly active. But when such a distinction is hardened into a division, in such a way that the invisible church is *detached* from the visible, mixed community, or the fullness of the church of the saints is disconnected from the pilgrim church in history, then significant ecclesiological problems develop.

What makes these strategies important, and attractive as a means of resolving the paradox of ecclesial holiness and sinfulness, is that they are rooted in real and important ecclesiological distinctions. So, for instance, with reference to the eschatological nature of the church, there is a crucial importance in distinguishing the state of the church in history, as it exists as the "pilgrim church" or the "church militant," from the state of the church as it exists in the fulfilled reign of God. To use the language favored by Augustine, the church as it moves through history is a "*corpus permixtum*," marked both by holiness and sin, and composed of those destined to persevere in grace to participation in the reign of God and those whose choices will lead them away from that participation. In the reign of God, in the light of the last judgment, the mixed nature of the church will cease and, in the words of 1 Corinthians 15:28, "God may be all in all." The experience of the church in time, therefore, is marked by this eschatological tension, as discussed in chapter 2, in which the church is already holy, but not yet fully holy; already participating in the fullness of the reign of God, but still struggling, and sometimes stumbling, in its pilgrimage.

But it would be an ecclesiological error to prematurely resolve this tension by attributing holiness *only* to the church in eternity, so that statements about the holiness of the church would be statements entirely about its future and not its present. At one level, such a position would more easily make sense of fact of sin in the church, since to understand ecclesial holiness as an entirely future goal and promise would de-scandalize the phenomenon of ecclesial sin; ecclesial failure would be less problematic, even expected, if the holiness of the church we profess in the creed were a completely future reality. But such a position would so emphasize the holiness of the church's destiny that it would fail to take into account our experience of holiness in the pilgrim church, both the "objective" holiness of its origins and structures and the real, lived holiness of holy individuals and holy communities. Describing the church as "stumbling toward

holiness" rather than "stumbling in holiness" would resolve the ecclesiological problem neatly and clearly, but at the cost of hardening the distinction between the church in via and the church in eternity into a division between two different realities.

One can find a similar strategy, and issue, in attempts to resolve the paradox through the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. Again, this move is rooted in an important ecclesiological distinction—that between membership in the church in an explicit, visible way that includes those who are members of the church " 'bodily' not 'in their hearts,' " and those members in whom the grace of their baptism and divine charity are active and operative. In the *corpus permixtum* that is the church in history, one can discern that not all of those who belong to and live within the outward structure of the church are actually in a truly saving relationship with God in Christ. Nevertheless, while with Vatican II we can *distinguish* those who are "fully incorporated into the society of the church" through their invisible possession of the Spirit of Christ[5] from the broader community and institutions in which they dwell, we ought not *divide* one from the other, as though there were an "invisible church" distinct from the one mixed body of the church or as though this invisible church were the "real" church by comparison to the outward, visible structures. Such a bifurcation of the church into two parts—a holy, sinless, and invisible church, and a mixed, sinful, and visible church—would seemingly solve the issue of ecclesial sin and sanctity, but at the cost of undermining the complex nature of the church, which is an invisible, spiritual community of grace participating in God's eternity, subsisting in a visible, institutional society that exists only within historical time and space.

One can see in all of these attempts to resolve the paradox of the church's holiness and sinfulness that this question very quickly leads us back to the earlier question of how we begin to define the church.[6] As soon as we begin to ask about sin and holiness in the church, we begin to ask about the relationship between the church as it moves

5. *Lumen Gentium*, 14.

6. In fact, this is what, beyond all of its pastoral and practical importance to Christian life, makes it rather fascinating for me and some other ecclesiologists at the theoretical level.

through history and its fulfillment in the reign of God, about how to understand the way in which the relation between God and the church is worked out between the inspiring action of the Holy Spirit and the limited and even damaged reality of the human beings being formed into God's holy people. Very quickly the basic question of "what is the church?" or, more accurately in Joseph Komonchak's terms, "who are the church?" arises. And if we return to the definition of the church as the *congregatio fidelium*, the assembly of the faithful, we can continue to view that assembly as always a mixed community of sinners and saints, moving through history toward its fulfillment in the reign of God, always joined to Christ, its head, to Mary, and to all of the holy women and men who have gone before us in faith, and yet always continuing to struggle in its pilgrimage toward its fullness. The kenosis of Christ in which God, irrevocably, joins humanity in its sufferings means that Christ and the holy ones, in their communion with the church on earth, continue to suffer with the church as it moves and grows through history. Any attempt to redefine the assembly of the faithful that minimizes or ignores its complex constitution of divinity and humanity, of holiness and sinfulness, fails in holding together the mysterious reality of what the church is.

Attempts such as the ones outlined here that divide the church into a divine part, which is holy, and a human part, which is sinful, misunderstand the relationship between nature and grace, and mistakenly ignore the kenotic participation of the divine in our limitations and sinfulness, and the participation of humanity in the holiness that God makes possible already within human history. As Yves Congar has written, "The presence of sinners in the church is not something accidental, a peripheral phenomenon; it represents something structural. The whole idea of the church is involved here."[7] To recall once again the liturgical assembly of the faithful as a primary locus in which we understand the church as the *congregatio fidelium*, in the celebration of the Eucharist the complex nature of the church is revealed: in the midst of a seemingly random gathering of often sinful and often confused people, bearing with them the particularities of their time and place and the joys and griefs of their biographies,

7. Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 98.

the holiness of God is made present in word and sacrament, in communion with Christ, with the holy women and men who went before them in faith, and, in a mysterious way, with the holy women and men yet to come. The chorus of the church singing its praise to God is able, with God's grace, to enfold even the discordant notes of human sin within its harmonies. An attempt to make sense of the holiness of the church that redefines the church as something other than this assembly of the faithful in all its complex mystery fails to do justice to the manner in which God has chosen to save us.

The Sinless Church of Sinners

From this perspective, therefore, it is important to take the time to look seriously, and critically, at one of the most common theological formulas used to address ecclesial sin and sanctity, that which would resolve the paradox by attributing holiness to the church but sinfulness to the members of the church. It can be found in various forms. A dominant strand goes back to the ecclesiology of Charles Journet in the early twentieth century, who in various texts propounded a formula in which "The Church is without sin but not without sinners."[8] In some ways this idea goes back much, much further—in the words of Yves Congar, "Basically the line of thinking used by the Fathers is the following: the church itself is holy, but her members are sinful."[9] But what was distinctive about Journet's formula, and the way in which it was applied in later twentieth-century ecclesiology, was that while the fathers of the early centuries usually held together these two aspects of the church in paradox, Journet and his successors presented this formula as a sufficient explanation for the simultaneity of holiness and sinfulness in the church. In doing so, Journet drew upon a distinction between the church "as such," as a "person" or relatively independent hypostasis, and its members; in Komonchak's helpful summary of Journet's theology:

8. The most complete collection of Charles Journet's writing on this topic can be found in Charles Journet, *L'Église sainte mais non sans pécheurs: compléments inédits de L'Église du verbe incarné. La cause finale et la sainteté de l'Église* (Saint-Maur: Parole et Silence, 1999). See also Jeanmarie Gribaudo, *A Holy Yet Sinful Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 74–83.

9. Congar, *True and False Reform*, 73.

> Journet . . . was of the view that the Church has a personhood of her own distinct from the persons of her members; to speak of the Church in terms of her members is to use a restricted, even an impoverished, sense of the term [in Journet's opinion]. It is the Church in the full sense that is unfailingly united to Christ as Body to Head, that is indefectibly holy in her being and in her activity. To her belong individual Christians in virtue of what is holy in them, of what lives by supernatural charity; by what is unholy in them, however, they do not belong to the holy Church. They may be said to be members of the Church, but the sin is theirs and not the Church's. In that sense it can be said that the Church is without sin but not without sinners.[10]

Such a conception of the fully holy person of the church distinct from any individual members came under critique by both Karl Rahner and Yves Congar, as will be discussed below, but despite their critiques this is, in many ways, the dominant explanation of ecclesial sanctity and sinfulness in Roman Catholic theology today.

The importance and even courage of Journet's attempt to address the phenomena of sinfulness in the church should never be underestimated. Journet wrote in the closing years of the "long nineteenth century," that is, in the decades in which the church understood itself as a fortress under siege by the forces of modernity and responded with an ultramontane theology that emphasized the perfection and the holiness of the church, particularly in the person of the pope. Writing just decades after the definitions of papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction in *Pastor Aeternus* of the First Vatican Council, and at a time when other theologians like Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Marie-Dominique Chenu were being condemned as modernists and removed from teaching positions, Journet found it important to broach the question of sinfulness within the church. His manner of explaining the presence of sin in the church entered into magisterial teaching in Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*. In a paragraph discussing the presence of sin within the church, the pope writes, "And if at times there appears in the Church something that indicates the weakness

10. Joseph Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), 63.

of our human nature, it should not be attributed to her juridical constitution, but rather to that regrettable inclination to evil found in each individual, which its Divine Founder permits even at times in the most exalted members of His Mystical Body, for the purpose of testing the virtue of the Shepherds no less than of the flocks, and that all may increase the merit of their Christian faith." He continues, "Certainly the loving Mother is spotless in the Sacraments by which she gives birth to and nourishes her children; in the faith which she has always preserved inviolate; in her sacred laws imposed on all; in the evangelical counsels which she recommends; in those heavenly gifts and extraordinary grace through which with inexhaustible fecundity, she generates hosts of martyrs, virgins and confessors. But it cannot be laid to her charge if some members fall, weak or wounded" (66).

At Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, despite calls for a more forthright discussion of ecclesial sin,[11] taught that "the church, however, clasping sinners to its bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal."[12] The language of "Holy Mother Church" and "her sinful sons and daughters" continues in the teaching of John Paul II[13] and reaches a climax of sorts in the treatment of ecclesial sin in the 2000 document of the International Theological Commission *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past.* As a whole, this document, while it makes some arguments open to critique, is highly nuanced in its treatment of the relationship of holiness and sin in the church. In a groundbreaking way for a quasi-magisterial document, it addresses the social nature of both ecclesial sanctity *and* sin, writing that "In this way, the holiness of each one influences the growth in goodness of others; however, sin also does not have an exclusively individual

11. See Stephen Laszlo, "Sin the Holy Church of God," in Hans Küng, Yves Congar, and Daniel O'Hanlon, *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 44–48; and Alberigo, *Chiesa Santa et Peccatrice*, 38–70, 81–104.

12. *Lumen Gentium*, 8. For his response to the conciliar teaching, see Karl Rahner, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II."

13. See Francis Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members Affect the Holiness of the Church?" in *In God's Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism in Honour of Michael A. Fahey, S.J*, eds. Jaroslav Z. Skira and Michael S. Attridge (Leuven, Belgium: University Press, 2006), 259–62.

relevance, because it burdens and poses resistance along the way of salvation of all and, in this sense, truly touches the Church in her entirety, across the various times and places" (3.3). It is also refreshingly frank in its treatment of what it calls "forms of counter-witness and of scandal" in the history of the church, especially regarding the divisions of Christians, the relations between Christians and Jews, the "use of force in the service of the truth," that is, the use of violence in evangelization or the maintenance of orthodoxy or unity, and possible cooperation in various contemporary evils (5).

For our purposes, the document makes a novel distinction between what it names the "holiness of the Church" and "holiness in the Church," which seems to correspond to the difference between the so-called objective holiness of the church's election, divine institution, and destiny and the subjective holiness of actually lived holy lives. The document states that

> One can distinguish, however, the *holiness of the Church* from *holiness in the Church*. The former—founded on the missions of the Son and Spirit—guarantees the continuity of the mission of the People of God until the end of time and stimulates and aids the believers in pursuing subjective personal holiness. The form which holiness takes is rooted in the vocation that each one receives; it is given and required of him as the full completion of his own vocation and mission. Personal holiness is always directed toward God and others, and thus has an essentially social character: it is holiness "in the Church" oriented towards the good of all. (*Memory and Reconciliation*, 3.2)

This interestingly puts the weight of ecclesial teaching regarding the holiness of the church upon its divinely instituted structures such that the more ambiguous experience of what the document terms "holiness in the church," affected as that is by the mixed reality of believers in their historical pursuit of personal holiness, only secondarily reflects or affects belief in the holiness of the church. If this reading is correct, then it seems to limit the attributions of holiness of the church to an ahistorical, timeless reality existing above the vicissitudes of the historical life and development of the church. Like some other options discussed above, this would seem to go beyond distinguishing the holy church from the sinful church, to contrasting

a holy church from the mixed concrete community of the faithful in which holiness and sinfulness coexist.

In sum, this trajectory that begins with Journet and finds its clearest most recent expression in the document of the International Theological Commission attempts to make sense of the paradox of ecclesial holiness and sin by sharply distinguishing the holy church from its sinful members. But this attempt to demystify that paradox, as important as it was historically in allowing Catholic theologians to talk openly about ecclesial failures past and present, leads to an ecclesiological mistake, that of positing an idealized, ahistorical entity called the church distinct from the gathered assemblies of the faithful moving through history. Through a kind of sleight of hand, what the church will be fully in the reign of God is posited as now true of—and only of—the idealized, formal structure of the church; and what the church is now, in its more ambiguous, paradoxical reality of "already, but not yet," is explained away as not "really" being the church. The "real church," in this perspective, is not the *communio fidelium* but rather the idealized structures that the assembly of the faithful receives with more or less fruitfulness. What the members of the church do—their personal holiness and their personal sinfulness—has no real effect upon the holiness of the church. Joseph Komonchak says about such ecclesiologies that instead of looking at actual ecclesial communities, they instead suggest that "it was as if there is an entity, somewhere above them, a suprapersonal reality, of which these things are true, an entity that is whatever these images say it is, that does whatever they say it does, apart from concrete men and women and their communities."[14]

This is not a new critique of this kind of ecclesiological explanation. As often happens, Karl Rahner preceded us in highlighting the ecclesiological difficulties of this position. In his earliest treatment of the question, "The Church of Sinners" in 1947, he wrote, "If we were merely to say, 'Certainly there are sinners in the Church, but this fact has nothing to do with the real Church,' we would be assuming an idealistic concept of the Church which from a theological point of view is very questionable. 'Church' is then an idea, an ideal, an

14. Komonchak, "Who Are the Church?" 12.

ought-to-be, something to which appeal can be made from the concrete reality, something which is meant to be reached only asymptotically, as it were, by slow approximation."[15] He continues, "If she is something real, and if her member are sinners and as sinners remain members, then she herself is sinful."[16] This identification of the "real church" with the "concrete reality," the actual historical assembly of believers moving through history, allows Rahner to forthrightly say that not only is the church sinful, but the church is sinful in a unique way compared to individuals or to other social bodies, "for she alone can distort by her sin the eternal visible presence of Christ in the world which she is and so wrap a shroud about him."[17]

At Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* avoided the explicit language of ecclesial sinfulness and instead, as noted above, referred to the church as "clasping sinners to its bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification."[18] Rahner critiqued the lack of explicit mention of ecclesial sinfulness at the council in a 1966 essay whose English title is "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II" and lamented that "the Constitution on the Church does not treat this question with the explicit clarity, intensity, and detail which one could perhaps have expected."[19] He drew upon a similar argument to the earlier essay that formulae that divide "the church" from "her members" lead to an understanding of the "holy church" as an abstraction disconnected from the actual, concrete historical community. He writes (and it is worth quoting at length) that in these theologies

> the Church . . . is somehow, without its being noticed, "hypostasized," she becomes almost like an independently existent "entity," which stands as teacher and guide *over against* the people of God; she does not appear to *be* this people of God itself . . . in its actual state of pilgrimage. For this reason it is easy to conceive

15. Rahner, "Church of Sinners," 259–60.

16. Rahner, 260.

17. Rahner, 262.

18. *Lumen Gentium*, 8. For his response to the conciliar teaching, see Karl Rahner, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," *Theological Investigations VI*, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (New York: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1969), 270–94.

19. Rahner, "The Sinful Church," 279.

> her and understand her as "holy" without the question arising whether or not (and how far) the sins and failings of her members fall on herself and, if so, how this can be reconciled with her true holiness which is part of the substance of her creed. Much less is it asked in a really radical and explicit way whether and to what extent even her "objective," "institutional" holiness in teaching, sacrament and law suffers a kind of reaction from the sinfulness of her members, if these objective realities are viewed not merely in abstraction but in their historical reality and in their actual realization by human beings in the Church.[20]

Though with more wariness and less harsh clarity than in the work of Rahner, Yves Congar also came to a similar critique of the idea of a holy church distinct from its sinful members. Congar is also more explicitly attentive to the eschatological dynamism of the church—to the fact that while we experience the church in its concrete historical reality, there is a certain sense in which God, in God's eternity beyond time, already knows and loves the church triumphant, the church at the end of the story. Nevertheless, particularly in his writings after the Second Vatican Council, Congar also critiques Journet's idea out of fear that only discussing the church in its "formal" elements or its "eschatological" fullness leads to an impoverished and inaccurate understanding of the church.

As early as the first edition of his classic text *True and False Reform in the Church* (1950), Congar argues strongly against an understanding of the church that would divide that which is holy in it from what is sinful. After distinguishing various senses of the word "church," focusing particularly on the church's divine foundation and structures and the visible, hierarchical society moving through history, Congar attempts to bring them together, arguing that despite his distinctions, he has "only distinguished the different aspects of one, single church that are reunited in the church's concrete reality. Yes, there is only *one* church."[21] The conjunction of the action of God and the response of human beings is the starting point for Congar's treatment of ecclesial sin and sanctity, and he sometimes uses the Aristotelian/Thomist logic of "form" and "matter" to distinguish the

20. Rahner, 277.

21. Congar, *True and False Reform*, 111. 127 in the original 1950 French version.

holy form of the church and the human matter that it orders and forms. He writes, "we can see how, if we take the church in its *concrete but adequate* sense, this church is both holy and full of sinfulness, both indefectible and fallible, both perfect and still subject to many historical imperfections. In the church, what comes from Christ is holy and without defect, but what comes from the exercise of human freedom is subject to mistakes. However, both the one and the other truly pertain to this concrete body which, if we take it for what it really is, is the church."[22] In this, one can see how Congar's thought mirrors, and influenced, *Lumen Gentium*'s treatment of the "complex reality" of the church.

He more explicitly addresses the formula of Charles Journet in at least three places. In an early essay on "How the Church Must Continually Renew Itself" (1961),[23] Congar first critiques what he then saw as the Protestant position in which the church's holiness remains either entirely future or entirely external—a holiness always "extranea, non domestica."[24] He then more explicitly addresses how in a Catholic theology one can account for the sins of the church. In doing so, he makes an epistemological distinction between God's knowledge and ours, between what God knows as the church in its fullness in eternity and what we know of church in history. "That which is worthwhile to God in the response of human beings, the response they make in faith and love, builds the Church for eternity: *this* is REALLY the Church. God sees it and knows it. For him, the Church is nothing but this holy part. But we can only know it very imperfectly. What *we* call the Church is the visible community of those who profess belief in God and in Jesus Christ, who have received his baptism and remained in the institution governed by the bishops and the pope. It is a certain historical reality. It is about this historical reality, not about the communion of saints, that people ask questions and are possibly scandalized."[25] He then begins to develop the

22. Congar, *True and False Reform*, 112. 128 in the 1950 version.

23. "Comment L'Église doit se renouveler sans cesse," found in Yves Congar, *Sainte Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1963), 131–54.

24. Ibid., 137.

25. Ibid., 145. "L'Église ne se construit pas seulement par les dons de Dieu, mais par la réponse des hommes à ces dons. Cette réponse ne leur est jamais totalement adéquate, tous les hommes sont pécheurs, excepté la Vierge Marie,

category of "pitiful things" [*misères*] and "faults" discussed above in reference to social sin, the ways which personal sins by members of the church affect it and condition it, without making it sinful in the proper sense. He concludes by referring more explicitly to Journet. He writes, "So in sum, I would agree to the formula of Bishop Journet (the Church is holy, though composed of sinners), but by completing it through consideration of this order of pitiful things or historical faults about which, especially today, there are questions and sometimes scandal. Do they touch the Church? Is the church their subject? Yes, they touch it, they have as their subject what *we* call the Church."[26]

Later, in his 1967 revised edition of *True and False Reform*, and in his 1970 volume *L'Église Une, Sainte, Catholique et Apostolique*, Congar seems more dissatisfied with Journet's formula for reconciling the coexistence of sin and holiness in the church. In *True and False Reform*, in revised notes on the treatment of the question by contemporary theologians, Congar refers back to his 1961 essay, writing that he came close to agreement with Journet in that article. "However," he writes, "I introduced a third term between the 'sinless' church as such and our sins, namely, the pitiful things, the more or less seriously harmful things, that happen to the church itself and to the exercise of its ministry. There are 'pitiful things' [*misères*], things that need to be corrected, that are clearly linked to the actual sins of members of the

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qui est la personnification concrète de l'Église sainte. Ce qu'il y a de valable pour Dieu dans la réponse des hommes, ce qui est fait par eux en foi et amour, construit l'Église pour l'éternité : c'est cela EN VÉRITÉ l'Église. Dieu le voit et le sait. L'Église, pour lui, n'est que cette part sainte. Mais nous pouvons la connaître, nous, que très imparfaitement. Ce que nous appelons, nous, l'Église, c'est la communauté visible de ceux qui professent croire en Dieu et en Jésus-Christ, qui ont reçu son baptême et demeurent dans l'institution gouvernée par les évêques et par le pape. C'est une certaine réalité historique. C'est au sujet de cette réalité historique, non au sujet de la communion des saints, que les hommes posent des questions et son éventuellement scandalisés."

26. Ibid., 147. "En sorte qu'au total, je souscrirais à la formule de Mgr. Journet (l'Église est sainte, bien que faites de pécheurs), mais en la complétant par la considération de cet ordre des misères ou des fautes historiques sur lesquelles portent d'ailleurs plus particulièrement aujourd'hui les questions et parfois le scandale. Touchent-elles l'Église? L'Église en est-elle le sujet? Oui, elles touchent, elles on pour sujet ce que nous appelons l'Église."

church."[27] The idea that this reflects increasing dissatisfaction with Journet's formula is reinforced by his mostly positive citation, in the following paragraph, of Rahner's "The Church of Sinners." Congar writes that "Karl Rahner took up this question with characteristic energy and frankness. We can't just talk about a kind of completely ideal Platonic church untouched by the actions of its members. If its members are sinners, then we need to speak of the church of sinners."[28]

Similarly, in *L'Église Une, Sainte, Catholique et Apostolique*, Congar raises further questions about the utility of Journet's formula. He writes, "It is certain that the Church, by reason of its formal and constitutive principles, is wholly pure. But does it suffice to consider it in its formal principles? The Church is a concrete historical reality; it is composed of men, and they are sinners, spiritually blind and obtuse, imperfect in a hundred ways. Cardinal Journet does not deny this, but he says: to the extent that they are such, they are not the Church; one must see them as cut vertically, divided between the Church and the world. But is that not to take a formal point of view as if it were the thing itself?"[29] Here we see Congar's hesitation to divide the church so starkly between the holy church and its sinful members.

Despite this critique of Journet, Congar, more than Rahner, wanted to preserve a space for speaking about an aspect of the church that was divinely instituted and unaffected by the sinfulness of its members. One can see in this Dominican priest an Aristotelian/Thomist conception of a perfect and holy "form" of the church that takes shape, imperfectly, in the "matter" of the members of the church. Unfortunately, at times this language slips from distinction to something closer to division, in which the "form" of the church is more really church than its "matter." Francis Sullivan points to an example in *True and False Reform* in which Congar writes that "the weaknesses are not to be attributed to the Church herself, but to her members."[30]

27. Congar, *True and False Reform*, 115.

28. Congar, 115.

29. Congar, *L'Église Une, Sainte, Catholique et Apostolique* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 136-137. This translation is taken from the citation in Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members," 254.

30. *True and False Reform*, 100. Cited in Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members," 255.

"When Congar distinguishes, as he does here," Sullivan writes, "between 'the Church herself' and her members, one can presume that by 'the Church herself' he means the Church as institution of salvation or as community. . . . However, I find it somewhat misleading to describe the Church considered under these aspects as 'the Church herself,' as though this were an entity really distinct from its members."[31] Congar's ambiguity on this point lacks the clarity of Rahner's forceful juxtaposition of ecclesial sanctity and sinfulness as both pertaining to the same entity, though in various ways; at one level, he is hampered by the lack of a theory of collective social action or of social sin and so cannot easily fit what he names the "pitiful things" or the "historical faults" of the church into his theology of the divine form and human matter of the church.

Even more so, however, what is at stake in how Rahner, Congar, and others' treatment of this question is not any particular instance of ecclesial holiness or sinfulness, any particular structure or grace given to the church by God, but the question of whether the church is actually a historical entity composed of historical individuals living out their own journeys into holiness, rather than an ahistorical ideal in which the church floats above human historical developments, serenely untouched. In Congar's Aristotelian terms, can there be a "form" of the church independent of the complex, mixed history of the members who compose it? There is a mystery here—the mystery that, in the present dispensation, God has chosen to save and elevate humanity into participation in the divine life not by immediately removing us from our historical form of existence, but by healing us in and through our history. The eschatological direction of that history, and the final recapitulation of all things in God, is not in doubt; but theologies that fast-forward through that history to the ending, so to speak, in their attribution of the final fullness of the church to the church as a whole, devalue the mystery of concrete human history that God has found worthy of maintaining and redeeming. Forms of ecclesiology that go further than that of Congar in abstracting from the church the divinely instituted structures and values that enable that history, and then positing that abstraction as the "real church," go astray in devaluing God's choice to build upon and perfect our

31. Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members," 255.

nature as beings who exist in particular times and places, beings whose individual and social bodies are irreducibly historical.

In some ways, Rahner's argument mirrors the thought of Bernard Lonergan, expressed in his classic essay "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness."[32] There, Lonergan summarizes some of his thoughts about the necessary transition from a worldview in which human nature is relatively static, changeless, and is best understood starting from abstract and universal truths. By contrast, Lonergan proposes that "one can begin from people as they are."[33] He identifies the classicist worldview as one in which "one can apprehend man abstractly through a definition that applies *omni et soli* and through properties verifiable in every man. In this fashion one knows man as such; and man as such, precisely because he is an abstraction, also is unchanging. It follows . . . that on this view one is never going to arrive at any exigence for changing forms, structures, methods, for all change occurs in the concrete, and on this view the concrete is always omitted."[34] One could insert the word "church" in place of "man"— so that, from a classicist perspective, it would read "one knows the church as such; and the church as such, precisely because it is an abstraction, also is unchanging."

By contrast, in a historically minded worldview, one can start from the empirical realities and with an expectation that most created realities are open to change, and change often, and that this form of existence is part of the goodness of the way God has created us. As Lonergan writes, from this perspective, "Intentionality, meaning, is a constitutive component of human living; moreover, this component is not fixed, static, immutable, but shifting, developing, going astray, capable of redemption; on this view there is in the historicity, which results from human nature, an exigence for changing forms, structures, methods; and it is on this level and through this medium of changing meaning that divine revelation has entered the world and that the Church's witness is given to it."[35] From this perspective, a church

32. In Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 1–9.

33. Lonergan, 3.

34. Lonergan, 5.

35. Lonergan, 6.

without a history, a church that is not always a mixed human community "going astray" or on pilgrimage toward full redemption, is not, in fact, the church. What Rahner and Lonergan suggest is that the church is best known and understood not only or even primarily as what the assembly of the faithful *will* be, but what in fact it actually is; and Rahner's call to take seriously the sinfulness of that assembly shows that how one answers the question of ecclesial sinfulness and holiness reveals in a profound way how seriously one takes the theological fact that the church is a historical people and not an abstraction. Congar, despite some ambiguity, was adamant in maintaining that there is one church, and, even if God already clearly sees and knows the future fullness of the holy church, Congar's ecclesiology and his historical studies exemplify his attention to the only church that we now know, the concrete church in which sin and sanctity coexist.

In short, Journet's formula preserves a way of describing the church as perfectly holy but, in a manner analogous to that of some Protestant ecclesiologies that would defer ecclesial holiness to the eschatological reign of God, does so by attributing holiness to something other than the concrete assembly of believers moving in and through history. Ironically, in its attempt to protect a perfectly holy form of the church from the sin the church experiences in its historical contingency, it also prevents or minimizes the attribution of real, concrete holiness to that church as such holiness occurs in the always ambiguous, mixed reality that is human existence.

Mother Church, Bride of Christ, Chaste Whore

This tendency toward a hypostasized entity distinct from the concrete, historical church is intensified and complicated when the idea of personhood is attributed to the church and when that personified church is described using ecclesial metaphors in which the church is imagined as a woman, usually in one or more of three images: as "mother church," as the "bride of Christ," or, often in relation to the nuptial imagery, that of the church as a "chaste whore." In addition to the numerous issues such images raise for theological anthropology and conceptions of gender, they also raise images for ecclesiology, since the slippage from using these metaphors to elaborate or rhetorically emphasize particular aspects of the church to their reification

contributes to the error of imagining that there is some entity called the church different from its members.

With regard to the personhood of the church, the allegorical imagination of the church as a person has deep roots in Scripture and tradition. Just as the people of Israel as a whole was often imaged as an individual person in the Hebrew Scriptures, and again, often as a woman, so too the early Christian church took up those images, applying them to the church and developing them further. Even in the New Testament, we see Christ speaking to Paul in Acts 9:5 so as to identify Paul's persecution of the church as the persecution of Christ himself. In the rich theologies of the body of Christ, and especially Augustine's theology of the church as the *totus Christus*, composed of head and members, we see the fruitfulness of this line of thought for the history of reflection upon the church.[36] One can even see in the use of personhood language to discuss the nature of the church something like a nascent attempt at positing the reality of collective action or shared agency. Like the idea of a "legal person" or other, nonreligious metaphorical descriptions of a shared entity as a person (e.g., "Britannia" or "Mother Russia" for modern nation-states, "Adam" for the human species, "Israel" for the Jewish people), ecclesial personhood is a metaphor that enabled pre-reflective understanding that a group acting as a group has distinctive characteristics and forms of agency. And, while many theologians would want to say that naming the church as a person is something different and "more" than personifying other social or political bodies, there is an important starting point in the way the church *is* like those bodies. Komonchak wants Christians to understand "from beginning to end that the Church is a social phenomenon, and that any answer to the question about the referent of the word will always refer us to a group of people, to 'real subjects' . . . the uniqueness of the Church in her theological mystery does not preclude but in fact requires exploration of what she may have in common with other human communities."[37]

What complicates the personhood of the church is the question of how the community is related to Christ; as Congar points out, it is

36. For an important summary of these issues, see Yves Congar, "La personne 'Église,'" *Revue Thomiste* 71 (1971): 613–40.

37. Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* 15.

as much a christological and pneumatological question as an ecclesiological one, since statements about the church as surpassing other "natural" human communities point to the uniqueness of this community's relationship to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.[38] Nevertheless, it seems possible, even necessary, to attempt to appropriate the tradition of the church in its proclamation of the distinctiveness of this community without recourse to an overly literal use of the ecclesial image of the church as a person. As Congar writes in summary after reviewing the possibilities, "The Church is not a person, it has no created 'subsistence,' it has no existence ending in an individual spiritual nature. It is not a hypostasis."[39] It differs from other human communities, but not by violating the nature of human social existence. A crude visual analogy would say that if we want to talk about an invisible reality that operates in and through the actions of individual human subjects, then that reality must be entirely "spiritual." But we have plenty of ways to talk carefully and critically about ontologically real, suprapersonal realities like communities of meaning, corporations, shared values, and institutions without resorting to reifying the metaphor of the church as person. Before positing an independent hypostasis of the church in order to make sense of such nonvisible realities, we would do better to look at other forms of social bodies that act, form values, transmit meaning, etc., as natural realities of human social life. What is distinctive about ecclesial sociality is the relationship of this particular social body to God in Christ, the healing and elevation of our natural sociality through Christ and the empowering Spirit of God.

This is especially true in the face of ecclesiologies that so hypostasize the independent nature of the church that the ecclesial person begins to float freely, becoming the subject of actions and attributions untethered to the actual human beings who compose the body of Christ. The most full-throated version of such a tendency can be found in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Particularly in his essay "Who Is the Church?"[40] (to which Komonchak's "Who Are the

38. See Congar, "La personne 'Église,'" 613.

39. Congar, 638.

40. "Who is the Church?" in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Spouse of the Word*. Explorations in Theology II (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 191.

Church?" is a subtle rejoinder),[41] Balthasar emphasizes the difference between the church as person and the attribute of personhood in any other collective human body. In Balthasar's work, in the preaching and thought of Pope John Paul II, and in that of other theologians who have emphasized the spousal nature of the church in recent years,[42] the church is most definitely not a "we" or an "it," but a "she," which allows them to invoke many of the traditional female images of the church (as mother, as bride of Christ, as "chaste whore") in connection with Mary as an image or type of the church.

We must tread carefully here, for a few reasons. First, it cannot be denied that the imagining of the church in these terms, and especially the symbolic identification of the church with Mary, is a deep and nearly constant part of Christian tradition and recent Catholic teaching.[43] The richness of reflection upon the church as mother of Christians through baptism and upon the church as the bride of Christ whose holiness depends upon her relationship to Christ ought not be dismissed out of hand; to do so would be to deny centuries of reflection upon the nature of the church in its relation to God. Nevertheless, for two reasons, we must use more caution in using these images than is sometimes found in treatments of the church. First, it is not coincidental that the images are female; they are often rooted in an understanding of gender and binary gender complementarity that no longer, or ought no longer, be taken as normative. For instance, the intelligibility of the metaphor of the church as "bride of Christ" turns upon an understanding of brides/wives as subordinate and receptive in relation to their husbands; as Susan Ross points out, "The metaphor was used precisely because men and women were not equal" within marriage.[44] In a context in which that understanding of gendered marriage no longer holds, the ecclesial metaphor makes

41. See Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* 12–15.

42. See, for instance, Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

43. See the collection of Hugo Rahner's writings on the imagery of the church in the patristic period in Hugo Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1965).

44. Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 111. See also Susan Ross, "The Bridegroom and the Bride: The Theological Anthropology of John Paul II and Its Relation to the Bible and Homosexuality," in *Sexual*

little sense, at best, and at worst leads to unwarranted conclusions regarding the role of women and men in their marriages, in public life, and in ecclesial ministry. This is especially true in the discussion of ecclesial holiness and sinfulness in terms of the "*casta meretrix*," the "chaste whore"—what could be more exemplary of the destructive dynamic that alternately idealizes and demeans women as either "virgins" or "whores" than an ecclesial image that combines the two?

For our purposes here, the second reason for caution in the use of these metaphors is the fact that, combined with a robust theology of ecclesial personhood, images with such obvious power and deep roots in the history of Christian reflection further distance the church as a semi-independent entity from its members. In some cases, it appears that the author in discussing the church as mother or bride discounts or has forgotten the symbolic or metaphorical nature of these attributions; in other cases, the metaphor makes the coexistence of ecclesial sin and sanctity less, rather than more, intelligible. For instance, in the International Theological Commission's *Memory and Reconciliation*, the document draws upon the image of the church as "Holy Mother Church" embracing "her sinful children." The document states that "the Church is touched by the sin of her children. She is holy in being made so by the Father through the sacrifice of the Son and the gift of the Spirit. She is also in a certain sense sinner, in really taking upon herself the sin of those whom she has generated in Baptism. This is analogous to the way Christ Jesus took on the sin of the world. Furthermore, in her most profound self-awareness in time, the Church knows that she is not only a community of the elect, but one which in her very bosom includes both righteous and sinners, of the present as well as the past, in the unity of the mystery which constitutes her" (3). Citing John Paul II's encyclical *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, the ITC writes that "In this sense the Church recognizes herself to be holy in her saints. While she rejoices over this holiness and knows its benefit, she nonetheless confesses herself a sinner, not as a subject who sins, but rather in assuming the weight of her children's faults in maternal solidarity, so as to cooperate in overcoming them through penance and newness of life. For this reason, the holy

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Diversity and Catholicism, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung, with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 39–59.

Church recognizes the duty 'to express profound regret for the weaknesses of so many of her sons and daughters who sullied her face, preventing her from fully mirroring the image of her crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and humble meekness.'"

The prominence of this personification of the church as "holy mother" distinct from "her sinful children" in the ITC document is not surprising, but, like the distinction between the holiness of the church and holiness in the church earlier in that text, it has a similar effect of distancing a semi-independent reality called "the church" from the members of that church. *Memory and Reconciliation* attempts to bridge this reality by outlining how the individual Christian can be both "Mother" and "child," writing that "each baptized person can be considered to be at the same time a child of the Church, in that he [sic] is generated in her to divine life, and Mother Church, in that, by his faith and love he cooperates in giving birth to new children for God. He is ever more Mother Church, the greater is his holiness and the more ardent is his effort to communicate to others the gift he has received" (3.4). But given the awkwardness of the application of this particular metaphor to the mixed realities of the life of Christians as holy and sinful, it seems that there may be more adequate ways of expressing the coexistence of sanctity and sin in the life of the church.

In sum, from a feminist theological perspective, there is a need for explicit attention to the constructions of gender and gender complementarity implied in the images of the church as holy mother, as bride of Christ, or as "chaste whore." While, as I have argued elsewhere,[45] there may be important reasons to attempt to retrieve or otherwise redeem the truths about the church expressed under these headings (the church's absolute dependence upon Christ, the church's complex situation as currently caught between its sinful present and its future holiness, etc.), some of these images may, in the end, be irredeemable for contemporary theological reflections; their power in expressing something of the mystery of the church is outweighed by the collateral damage they do to our understandings of gender and to actual mothers, brides, and women. More pertinent, from a

45. See Brian P. Flanagan, "The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology," *Horizons* 35 (2008): 32–53.

systematic ecclesiological perspective, the church must always be seen as a personal reality, in that its basic nature revolves around the relationship of human persons to each other and to the persons of the Trinity. But the reinforcement of an idea of the church as an independent subsistence, as a real and not metaphorical person to which these images can lead is a real risk, leading to flawed ecclesiology both in relation to this question of ecclesial sin and sanctity, and in other questions such as the nature of ministry, the church's mission, and the church's hierarchical structure. By contrast to *Liturgiam Authenticam*'s instruction that, "insofar as possible in a given vernacular language, the use of the feminine pronoun, rather than the neuter, is to be maintained in referring to the Church,"[46] I think it better to think of the church, and perhaps liturgically refer to the church, as "we" or "it" rather than as "she" if we want to avoid the idealist pitfall of hypostasizing the church.

46. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Liturgiam Authenticam*, 2001, 31d.

CHAPTER 6

Naming the Holy and Sinful Church

Having outlined some of the problems I think arise with past attempts at reconciling the sin and sanctity of the church, what, then, are we left with? How does one begin to make sense of the paradox that the church is both holy and sinful? Is there an explanation, a formula, that would reconcile these two aspects of ecclesial reality such that we could easily make sense of them? If the most common way of doing so, the formula that suggests that "the church does not sin, but her members do," is not adequate to the task, then with what do we replace it?

Depending upon your assumptions and expectations, this chapter may be the most enlightening or the most disappointing part of this book, in that I do not have such an easy solution. In short, the sanctity and sinfulness of the church participates in the negative mystery of sin and evil and the overabundant mystery of God, and so rather than a solution we are left with a paradoxical tension—a reality to be lived and prayed rather than fully understood. I hope that this will not be perceived as a "cop-out," as the equivalent of an under-prepared teacher appealing to mystery to avoid a difficult question, but instead as the perception of mystery that is possible only after careful examination of a theological question. In this chapter, I would like to say more about how we can speak properly about ecclesial sin and sanctity, but the reader should be alerted that rather than a clever solution that would finally make sense of these realities, all I have to offer are some words on how we can less inadequately understand this aspect of the mystery of the church.

As I have repeatedly cautioned, the difficulty in speaking about the coexistence of sin and sanctity in the church revolves around the fact that we "see through a glass darkly," in two senses. First, there is the negative mystery of continuing human participation in sin and

evil, even after the justifying grace of baptism begins to save and heal us. There are real members of the church who, while baptized, no longer love with charity and are "dead" to God in their sinfulness; much more common, however, are the great bulk of us who regularly, daily, fail in far less deadly but no less real ways in our attempts to love God and neighbor. As Neil Ormerod writes, because of concupiscence, our drive toward greater love of God and neighbor "may be swamped by other, more powerful drives and desires and so become ineffective in shaping the direction of our lives."[1] The absence of meaning that is sin also affects the church as a whole, both in the ways these small failings accumulate in the concupiscence-like reality of ecclesial social sin and in the related way in which the church, as a collective actor, fails in its mission to make the reign of God more present in our world. Why we do what we do in big ways and small, as individuals and together, and even as we attempt to act together as church is part of the mystery of evil that remains opaque to knowledge because it is, fundamentally, irrational.

At the same time, the way in which the church participates in the mystery of God remains differently mysterious, though no less difficult for us to understand fully. Our holiness, as individuals and as church, is always by definition more than we are able to comprehend. This is especially true if we return to our understanding of holiness as being more than the absence of sin and more even than a matter of moral activity. Holiness is, at heart, participation in the very life of God (which of course expresses itself in love of God and neighbor), and our participation is in relationship to a God who is paradoxically transcendent and close, always Other and always More than we are able to know. Additionally, the holiness of the church is not a participation in God's holiness in any abstract way, but precisely through its relation to God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Our holiness as church is part of the mystery of our life in Christ; the metaphors by which the church is the "body of Christ" and the "bride of Christ" point to how intimately and powerfully the church is in a dependent, continuing relationship with its Lord; Christ did not just found a

1. Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 73.

church and walk away—Christ is a continuing presence as the head of the church and its holiness is dependent upon him as the manner in which God has come close to his people. That presence is also directly connected with the indwelling Holy Spirit in the church, whose very presence brings ecclesial holiness into being and sustains it. And so the reality of the church's holiness, a participation in the holiness of the triune God, always by definition exceeds our grasp.

Another way in which both the sanctity and sin of the church remains mysterious to us revolves around the opaqueness to us of the way in which God has chosen to save and transform the world, what theologians call God's "economy," God's "management" of his creation. As in the realm of "theodicy"—the area of philosophy that questions how one can understand or justify the presence of evil in the world and the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God—one could ask why God's saving grace does not act in such a way that the world did not have to continue to struggle in its journey toward the fullness of the reign of God, or why the church has to exist in the eschatological tension of the "already" and the "not yet." Why must it continue to pray to God that "your kingdom come"? One reading of 2 Peter 3 would suggest that this delay is the result of God's patience and desire to show mercy; in addition, without basing an entire eschatology on one text, one can easily point to the parables of the wheat and the weeds and of the net full of fish in Matthew 13 to suggest that the extended period of eschatological tension between Christ's nativity and his future coming is part of a plan known only to God. The mystery of the church cannot but be caught up in this wider mystery of the world and its recapitulation in Christ; and so, at the moment when we might wish to have a clear or easy answer to the question of why the church stumbles in its growth toward holiness, we are left with the mystery of human freedom and divine providence as they are being worked out in history.

Guidelines for a Theology of Ecclesial Sin and Sanctity

This does not, however, mean that we must, or even can, remain entirely silent regarding the mystery of ecclesial sanctity and sin. I would like to propose five guidelines for talking about holiness and sin within the church that function less to explain the nature of the

church than to set up some ground rules, some ecclesiological borderlines, to prevent us from error. In this way I'm drawing on something akin to Nicholas Lash's idea of dogmatic propositions as something like "protocols against idolatry"—that is, rules that, rather than explain exactly what we mean, set up the boundaries in which we can think and talk about divine mystery.[2] My five guidelines are the following: First, ecclesial sanctity and sinfulness are always conditioned by the complex nature of the church, and so while aspects of the church can be distinguished, we cannot divide the holy church from the sinful church. Second, given the co-conditioning of the church in history, the church that we know as the "concrete church" by its holiness and its sinfulness, one cannot talk about its holiness without talking about its sinfulness, nor can one talk about its sinfulness without talking about its holiness. Third, in our present environment, given the reluctance to talk about ecclesial sin frankly and forthrightly, there is a need to clearly state the potential and actual sinfulness of the historical church in order to ground more clearly ecclesial repentance and conversion. Fourth, despite this, God's holiness is stronger than human sinfulness, and God's love is greater than human self-centeredness; despite the need to balance discussion of ecclesial sin and sanctity, they should not be mistaken for being in actual balance, in a quasi-Manichean struggle of good and evil. And fifth, and finally, the church's growth in holiness gives the history of the church a certain directionality toward the reign of God; while importantly different from naive modernist theories of continual progress, the church is a pilgrim and not simply a wanderer.

Guideline #1: We cannot divide the holy church from the sinful church. As discussed throughout this book, the church is a complex reality. It is neither a purely historical reality, nor a purely eternal heavenly body. As the joint product of God's designs and free human responses to those designs, the church always exists within the eschatological tension of *already* living the life of the eternal reign of God and yet doing so in the *not yet* of our current difficulties and challenges. It also exists in the complex interplay of God's founding and guidance of the church toward its fulfillment and the always limited responses

2. See, for instance, Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

in holiness and sinfulness of the members of the church. It is important to emphasize once again *Lumen Gentium*'s teaching that "the society equipped with hierarchical structures and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly church and the church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality comprising a human and a divine element" (8). Any theology, therefore, that attempts to explain the coexistence of ecclesial sanctity and sin by dividing the church into two—a holy church and a sinful church—fails to present an important aspect of this mystery. "Remove the humanity from either Christ or the Church, and there is no mystery. Separate the two as if one set of statements apply to one reality and the other to another, and there is no mystery. One of the chief tasks of ecclesiology is to try to understand how such glorious things can be said of a group of sinful human beings."[3]

That is not to say that distinctions may not be necessary; for instance, distinguishing the church as it will be in its fullness from the church as we know and experience it now is a necessary part of explaining Christian ecclesial hope. But such distinctions must not be made in such a way that divide the earthly church from the heavenly church, or the church in history from its eschatological fulfillment. This guideline rules out of bounds attempts to smooth over the wrinkles of current ecclesial life by attributing holiness only of the future fullness of the church or by attributing sinfulness only to the "members" of the church and not to a hypostasized or personalized entity called "the church" entirely distinct from those members. An adequate ecclesiology must recognize that, in Congar's phrase, "the presence of sinners in the church is not something accidental, a peripheral phenomenon; it represents something structural."[4]

Guideline #2: One cannot talk about ecclesial holiness without talking about ecclesial sinfulness, nor can one talk about ecclesial sinfulness without talking about ecclesial holiness. Lumen Gentium, in discussing the complex nature of the church, invokes a christological comparison, writing that the church can be compared "in no mean analogy, to the

3. Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), 22.

4. Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 98.

mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature, inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living instrument of salvation, so, in somewhat similar fashion, does the social structure of the church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body" (8). As discussed above, such christological analogies have a long history in ecclesiology[5] and are complicated by the fact that the church's relation to the Spirit is much more like a dyophysite ("Nestorian") relation than the Chalcedonian understanding of the hypostatic union. Nevertheless, the christological analogy is helpful here. Chalcedonian Christology posits less a full understanding of the mystery of the two-natured person of Christ than a series of attempts to properly name both aspects of Christ's person, his full humanity and his full divinity. In a somewhat similar way, we can posit that the church's mystery cannot be fully understood but that we need to name in our speech and thought attention to both its human and divine aspects—its connection to God through Christ and the Spirit and its reality as a community of human beings.

For our purposes here, a corollary of such a pattern of speech would be the need to maintain in our speech and thought our awareness both of the church's holiness in its connection to God and of the church's sinfulness as a community that regularly fails to respond perfectly to the Spirit's promptings. If I were to name this principle, I would call it the "Laszlo Rule," after Bishop Stephen Laszlo of Eisenstadt, Austria. At Vatican II, Laszlo gave a speech on "Sin in the Holy Church of God" and concluded with recommendations for the council that, first, "we should not be silent about sin in the holy Church of God and even in its hierarchy; furthermore, in similar fashion, we should speak of the glory *and* the sins of the people of God." Second, "There should not be only an insistence everywhere on the union of the Church with Christ, but also on the distance of the pilgrim and penitent Church from Christ, who is the Lord of the Church and who alone is holy."[6]

While the council obviously did not explicitly state the sinfulness of the church as Laszlo had suggested, his recommendation that we

5. See, for instance, Yves Congar, "Dogme Christologique et Ecclésiologie: Vérité et limites d'un parallèle," in *Sainte Église* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963), 69–104.

6. Laszlo, "Sin the Holy Church of God," in Hans Küng, Yves Congar, and Daniel O'Hanlon, *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 47.

consistently speak both "of the glory *and* the sins" of the church is crucial to maintaining awareness of the paradox of the church's existence. This is true especially for some Catholic and Orthodox Christians, whose veneration of the church's holiness is such that it makes it difficult to speak clearly and honestly about the church's failures. But it is also true for those theologians, including some Protestant Christians, whose awareness of the depth of human sin, even in the community called the church, precludes attention to ecclesial holiness. Further, in the face of critics of the Christian church who are unable to imagine the possibility of God's holiness being shared in history with such a motley crew of flawed individuals and communities, the proclamation of the church as sinful and holy is an essential part of contemporary witness and evangelization. We must be unafraid either to admit our failures or to give voice to God's sanctifying presence.

Guideline #3: Clear teaching regarding sin in the church is essential for its repentance and further conversion. This guideline is perhaps more specific for my own Roman Catholic context in North America in the early twenty-first century. Given guideline #2's imperative that we not talk about ecclesial sanctity without sin or about ecclesial sin without sanctity, it seems counterintuitive to prioritize speech about ecclesial sin. And yet, given the historic reluctance of the Catholic Church to speak about the occurrence of sin within the church except in the hushed tones of scandal or an unconvincing denial of guilt, it would seem necessary for my community to take positive steps toward more directly addressing the phenomenon of sin in the church. Other communities may need to recover a sense of ecclesial holiness as a present reality rather than simply an asymptotic goal, but in a Catholic Church often limited in its ability to speak officially about its failures in love of God and neighbor, there may be a need for a paradoxically negative "affirmative action" campaign regarding ecclesial sin.

Such a campaign would move in two directions. First, it would need greater teaching and catechesis on the theology of ecclesial sin, such that the mystery of the coexistence of holiness and sinfulness in the church could be taught clearly. Without denying the inspiring presence of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate indefectibility of the church, or the greater power of the saving presence of God over human sin (see guideline #4), Catholics in particular could benefit from learning how the failures of the church are part of the mystery of the church

and not simply "fake news" proposed by those who would want to undermine the church. A second direction would be to continue to lift up through narrative and prayer particular stories of individual and collective ecclesial failure. Much of this book has proceeded at a high level of abstraction, outlining the theological structure by which we can come to speak more clearly about ecclesial holiness and sinfulness. But, in addition to its liturgical expression, this project will remain incomplete if it does not open or widen a path to multiple, diverse, local expressions, particularly in narrative and prayer, of both experiences of ecclesial sanctity and experiences of ecclesial sin. Remembering and telling the dangerous memories of ecclesial failure, the particular narratives of times and places where the church has stumbled or failed in its response to the Spirit, is a crucial practice for honesty in the knowledge of our history. Such narratives cannot be left freestanding, however, as simply a dark chapter of history or a mark of shame but should lead from memory to prayer of lament and repentance. The papal apologies of Pope John Paul II and, more recently, of Pope Francis provide foundational examples of such forms of prayer. Aided by an ecclesiology less fearful to admit the paradoxical sinfulness of the holy church, however, such forms of prayer could more clearly highlight the continuing need for repentance and purification that Vatican II discussed and weave the story of our mixed pilgrimage more clearly into our understanding and imagination of the church.

The work of taking responsibility for and repenting of ecclesial sin does more than simply admit to the mistakes of the past; rather, in a church aware that the coexistence of failure is constitutive of the church at all times until its fulfillment—a reality in the present rather than just a phenomena of the past—attention to ecclesial sinfulness provides the means for greater ecclesial conversion. "Only if the Church recognizes herself to be the Church of sinners will she be permanently convinced of the fact, and aware of the full force of the obligation it entails, that she has a constant need of being cleansed, that she must always strive to do penance and achieve inner reform."[7]

7. Rahner, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," *Theological Investigations VI*, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (New York: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1969), 292–93.

Lament for past failure, in addition to allowing prayer with and for those who preceded us in their mixed journey of faith, also prompts us to awareness of the possibility of our current ecclesial sin. As Richard Lennan writes, "Whenever the sinful church professes belief in the holiness that God enables, it also acknowledges its need for a more thoroughgoing conversion to God. As a church, we hear the holy word of God and share in the holy sacraments: through these experiences, we are invited to a deeper trust in God, who is the source of mercy and forgiveness, who enables us to move toward greater integrity. Paradoxically, then, the holiness of the church, no less than its hope, can shine most brightly when we acknowledge our failings and our need for the love of God that is always greater than those failings."[8] Just as is the case for personal, individual sin, ecclesial sin is known in its undoing, as the tangled strands of past mistakes and injustice are slowly unknotted by the Holy Spirit active in and through our work of repentance.

Guideline #4: God's holiness is stronger than sin. Despite the need to address more forthrightly the reality of ecclesial sin in the life of the church, this should not be done in such a way that one could think of the two realities as equally matched dueling partners. Rather, belief in the holiness of the church, as an extension of the church's belief in the real guiding presence of God the Holy Spirit, is a statement of faith that while the stories of individual Christians' lives remain in doubt and always open to acceptance or refusal of God's offer until their death, the "end of the story" of the church, the destiny of the church, is not a matter of doubt. This is not a statement of pride on the part of the church, or of naive optimism on the part of believers, but rather a statement of faith in the life-giving power of God's economy. This is what theologians have meant by the idea of ecclesial indefectibility, the idea that the Holy Spirit would never so allow the church to stumble in its pilgrimage that it lost its way entirely. But ecclesial indefectibility is never a guarantee that the way will be easy or without detour; rather, it refers to the church's faith in God's power to save and elevate all creation and the reality

8. Richard Lennan, "The Church: Got Hope?" in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid (New York: Paulist, 2013), 51.

of the acceptance of that power in freedom by the members of the church throughout history. With appropriate cautions, this is at least one of the main values that the image of the church as the spotless bride of Christ is attempting to convey—that through the church's close connection to Christ, the church truly is made holy in a way that cannot be thwarted. It is also here that the model of the saints, and especially the model of Mary, as Mother of God and as Mother of the Church, points ahead to the reality of God's salvation and the ability of humans to freely open themselves to God's saving grace. The holiness of Mary, the holiness of the saints, and the holiness of the church even in our own mixed experience are proofs and foretastes of the fidelity of God.

Karl Rahner summarizes the tension between such belief in the unstoppable holiness of the church as an act of faith, as belief, and as hope: "God really *has* redeemed, he really *has* poured out his Spirit, he really *has* done mighty things for sinners, he *has* let his light shine in the darkness. His light shines, it is visible, and there is a tangible assembly of those whom he has called out of the kingdom of darkness and whom he has brought into the kingdom of the Son of his love. Because the Church must praise *God's grace*, she must also profess herself to be the holy Church. This profession humbles her; for she always testifies anew by this against what she is of herself: the flock of the poor, the stubborn, the sinful, of those who of themselves are very obviously lost."[9] The evidence of the individual lives of personal holiness, both known and unknown, that we venerate as the saints, the evidence of holy communities that have made God's victory over sin and death known in history, and even the far more mundane, and yet unimaginable, holiness of the church gathered regularly to hear the word of God and celebrate the Eucharist all provide circumstantial evidence—glimmers of hope, moments of grace where the fullness of God's sanctity breaks through into the life of the world in word and deed. Instead of a despairing pessimism disguised as a realist honesty about the "ways of the world," the Christian conviction is that despite our own inadequacy and failures, holiness wins.

9. Rahner, "The Church of Saints," *Theological Investigations* III (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 94.

Guideline #5: The church is on pilgrimage towards its full holiness. A final guideline for understanding the church's sin and sanctity is related to the reality that the Spirit's work of drawing us closer into God's holiness is more powerful than the reality of human sin. The mystery of the church's holiness and sinfulness, therefore, is not rooted in a static balancing of grace and sin, but is an aspect of the church's movement in history toward its fulfillment. This is not to say that the church is always moving onward and upward in an upward curve; each generation of the church, and each local church in a different time, place, and context, will have its own unique way of being holy and its own unique temptations to sin. Rather than traveling in a straight line, the church in every time and place wanders its way toward the fullness of the reign of God, sometimes receiving God's grace such that the heavens drop down and God's presence is known and felt, and sometimes stumbling as it journeys forth.

And yet the church knows its destination, both in faith and in the regular experience of salvation in history. This is why the image of the church as pilgrim might be most helpful in elucidating the paradox of ecclesial sanctity and sin. The image of the pilgrim church suggests how the church is always on a journey toward the fullness of grace, always participating in the fullness of the reign of God partially and in a preliminary way. And yet, the pilgrim church knows where God's promised land lies and the general direction toward which it is heading, even if the mystery of evil and sin, and God's respect of human freedom, allows not only for individuals to wander off that path, but for the community as a whole to sometimes stumble or take an extended detour.

This image is not new; Vatican II describes the church as a pilgrim, and Rahner, among others, suggested that it would well capture his understanding of the church's sinfulness and holiness. We must be cautious not to use the image as an attempted "all-inclusive model" of the church, replacing other powerful metaphors that have been used in this way, like "church as People of God" or "church as Communion" with "church as Pilgrim."[10] The image of the church as pilgrim is not an ecclesiological cure-all for all relevant questions.

10. See Brian Flanagan, "The Limits of Ecclesial Metaphors in Systematic Ecclesiology," *Horizons* 35 (2008): 32–53.

Nevertheless, the image of the church on its pilgrimage helps us draw some of the mystery of this particular question together in a more manageable way: the reality of the church's journey in the midst of eschatological tension, the bonds between those who walk on pilgrimage together, the dynamic between knowledge of the final destination and regular failure to follow the most direct path toward that destination, and the dependence of the church upon God, and especially upon God's Holy Spirit leading and guiding the church through the desert of our current wandering. The Holy Spirit acts like a pillar of fire or a pillar of cloud before us, drawing us forward like a magnet toward the form of human living and loving, the "people that God wants,"[11] that God already makes holy and will delight to make fully holy. Holiness catches fire and lights our path before us. Augustine, in a sermon cited by Joseph Komonchak, compares the church precisely to a group of pilgrims walking together: "They talk to one another, and individually set on fire, they make a single flame [*incensi singillatim faciunt unam flammam*], and the flame created by their conversation as they approach carries them on to the holy place, and their holy thoughts make them holy."[12]

These Guidelines in the Liturgy

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to where we began, to suggest that these guidelines reflect—in a secondary theology that attempts to make distinctions and explain apparent contradictions—the primary theology of ecclesial sin and holiness expressed in the liturgy I highlighted in the first chapter. The structure and content of the Eucharist expresses better than this book who we are as holy and sinful church, and better holds these two aspects of the mystery together in tension. But my hope is that the extended exploration of the details of who we are that this book has pursued can help us to return, with renewed attention, to the mystery of the church we are

11. This phrase of Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard is, for me, a touchstone of the real salvific purpose of the church, not as simply a vehicle or mechanism to "get us to heaven," but a foretaste of the kind of redeemed human life together with God and with each other that God has always dreamed of.

12. From Augustine, En. In Ps. 121, 2-4; PL 37:1619, cited in Komonchak, *Who Are the Church?*, 38n30.

and that we reveal each time we gather to hear God's word and participate in the Spirit-given body of Christ that we are.

First, the experience of actual life in the gathered assembly of the Eucharist is, if we have eyes to see our neighbors and more importantly ourselves clearly, consistent with the first guideline's concern not to divide the church between its holy and sinful members. Every local congregation is a mixed community, living out its tension between full response to God and its failures to do so. Each local congregation approaches the Word and table by first repenting for its sins and prepares to receive Christ in sacramental form by asking the Father "to forgive us our trespasses." We do so in communion with the saints who already participate in God's holiness in eternity and yet by their communion with us also participate in our continuing, sometimes stumbling, pilgrim church in history. Entering into the life of the blessed with God is not only an act of glory; it can also be kenotic, a form of emptying, as the holy ones are able to enter more deeply into our pain and our mistakes; we help to heal each other, through prayer and active compassion in many of our eucharistic assemblies, and in so doing are formed into the saints we long to be.

The *ordo* of the liturgy also exemplifies the "Laszlo rule" of always speaking about the church's holiness and the church's sinfulness together. The pattern I identified in chapter 1—of motion toward greater participation in the life of God, preceded by moments of repentance and recognition of the need for God's mercy and healing—is the way in which the holy church always repents, even that the holy church becomes holy, becomes closer to God, through the act of acknowledging and repenting its sinfulness. We gather together under the sign of the cross and ask that the Lord have mercy so that we can then sing God's praises in the Gloria. We offer our sacrifice, in bread and wine and in our lives, to God, asking God to give us the strength that we need to be who God calls us to be. We pray for the whole community's growth in holiness, looking forward to the day and the place that we the pilgrim church have not yet reached, to the kingdom that has not yet come. And after we ask the Father to forgive our sins, as Jesus taught us, we enter into deeper communion with God and with each other, aware that we are not worthy that God should enter into our lives, and yet God says the word and our souls are healed. Finally, we are sent out into the world to glorify God by

our lives, knowing full well that we will need to ask God for forgiveness the next week, the next day, that evening when we pray the Our Father once more.

The rhythm of the Eucharist also points to the fourth and fifth guidelines, our confidence in the ultimate victory of God in Christ and our knowledge of the church as not static, but on pilgrimage. The Eucharist is a moment of hope, a moment of joy in the reality of God's merciful presence in and through our stumbling community. The act of gathering, drawing near to God's presence in word, sacrament, presider, and assembly, and the miniature pilgrimage each week when we process to receive the Eucharist, show something of the motion of the church, motion that occurs liturgically as a reminder of the motion that occurs regularly if not always perfectly in our individual and collective life as church. We are not simply gathered together in a foretaste of the reign of God, but are also then sent out together to walk the next stage of the journey.

Finally, much of this book has focused upon the need to address more clearly the church as sinful within Roman Catholic theology and practice. Here, too, the liturgy reinforces and supports that third "guideline," as attention to the naming of our sin and our prayer for God's mercy, for ourselves and for all God's holy church, runs through the liturgy as it runs through the life of the church. My hope for this exploration in thinking more about the sinfulness of the church is not to encourage ecclesial pessimism or scandal, but to help us pray that "God have mercy on *us*, / forgive *us* our sins, / and bring *us* to everlasting life,"[13] more clearly aware that God does not have mercy only on *you, me*, or *them*, but upon *us*, upon a beloved sinful yet holy church. Acknowledgment of *our* stumbling allows *our* reception of God's mercy, and in so doing awareness of ecclesial sin becomes good news, set within the larger horizons of God's mercy. As a pilgrim church, we are wanderers in the desert, depending upon Christ for our daily bread and upon the Holy Spirit to lead us onward to be the fully holy people God has called us to be.

13. Roman Missal, 515, 517, 519. Emphasis added.

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